

## Seeking our True History

John sat at the long kitchen table in the warehouse conversion he shared with his partner Carrie. Both were dressed for the cold, John in a military trench coat and Ugg boots and Carrie in layers of colourful woollens, fingerless gloves, and long thick socks.

The afternoon light pouring through the industrial windows cast their shadows along the table and seemed to increase the chill. Rainwater seeped down the walls from a recent shower and there was a bucket collecting drips from a leak in one of the skylights.

John's Uncle Brian hadn't unbuttoned his camelhair overcoat. A lacquered Liberal Party pin gleamed from the lapel.

'Take a seat.' John indicated a rickety chair opposite. Brian lowered himself gingerly and rummaged in a pocket for his cigarettes and lighter. He lit a cigarette and exhaled, tapping the silver lighter on the table. Carrie got to her feet and opened a window.

'Tea? Water?' she asked.

'Never touch the stuff. Spoils a good whisky.' Brian chuckled.

An awkward silence ensued, then Brian nudged an untidy pile of books and said, '*Dark Emu*, eh? You've read it?'

'Yes,' said John, 'it's awesome.'

'Really eye-opening,' Carrie added.

'What do you mean, eye-opening?' Brian said, his gaze lingering on her dreadlocks and scruffy gloves before turning to his nephew.

John returned his uncle's look, trying to hide his dismay. This wasn't the first time they'd sparred on the topic of Australia's First Nations people. He was well aware of his uncle's views.

'It's eye-opening because it shows that Europeans were aware of Aboriginal land-use practices, even agriculture and dwellings, but somehow that has been edited out of the story. They were characterised – are still characterised – as hunter-gatherers—'

'That's because they were,' Brian interrupted.

Ignoring Brian's comment Carrie chipped in, 'Which of course justified the whole terra nullius thing.'

'Hang on a sec,' Brian said. 'Pascoe claims that classifying people as hunter-gatherers is prejudicial to Aboriginal land rights, doesn't he.' Brian looked around for an ashtray. Finding none, he reached over and ashed his cigarette in a plant pot. 'But his claim is wrong because Aboriginal land rights are not based on the economic use of the country; they are founded on Aboriginal people's continual spiritual belonging to country.'

'So, you've read it ... the book?' John asked, surprised.

Brian was silent for a moment before shaking his head. 'Yes, for what it's worth. I'm not even sure Pascoe is Indigenous, is he?'

John studied his fingernails. His uncle's prejudice wasn't new to him.

'You're probably too young to remember this, but back in September 2010, Senator Peter Kavanagh condemned the Native Title Bill, arguing that Indigenous people could not claim native title because

they were nomads and had no concept of land ownership. And he wasn't on my side of the house!

'He was wrong,' said Carrie, glancing at John, who was typing rapidly on his phone.

'He was from the DLP,' John said, looking up from his phone. 'What would you expect?'

Brian shrugged. 'DLP, ALP, they're not my lot!'

John rolled his eyes. 'Old news,' he said. 'Not relevant.'

'I've also read *Farmers or Hunters-Gatherers*,' Brian added. 'That's pretty relevant.'

'What is it?' John asked.

'Sutton and Walshe have written a book that questions Pascoe's claim that Indigenous people were agriculturalists prior to 1788.'

John thrust his shoulders back and sat up straight. He turned towards Carrie and asked, 'Have you heard of it?'

'No,' she replied, shaking her head, 'but I've read an article about it. The media are all over it of course.'

Brian sat back in his chair. 'Unlike Pascoe, they argue the economy prior to 1788 fell somewhere between hunter-gathering and agriculture, but was neither.'

John turned towards his uncle, rolled his eyes, and said, 'Really? That's the first I've heard of it.'

Brian snorted. This seemed to amuse him. 'I heard Peter Dutton MP accusing Pascoe of being an Indigenous wannabe,' Brian said, running a hand through his thick grey hair and failing to hide a smirk.

‘But Dutton—’ Carrie began.

‘Didn’t Dutton withdraw those remarks?’ John said at the same time, casting an apologetic glance her way.

‘Could have.’ Brian shrugged, looked around and again ashed his cigarette in the plant pot.

‘Pascoe argues that permanent housing and villages were a way of life for some Indigenous people before the European invasion,’ John said.

‘Invasion,’ Brian repeated with a sniff of derision.

John ignored him and said firmly, ‘He argues that at the time of European invasion some Aboriginal people practised agriculture, stored food, built and lived in dwellings and sewed clothes.’

Carrie glanced at John. She could see the pressure building underneath his calm exterior, recognised the signs.

‘Sutton and Walshe say a study of the people in the Darling Basin done by Harry Allen refers to seeds and roots being collected and gathered, but does not mention sowing or irrigating plants.’ Brian stopped for a moment to concentrate on his cigarette, then continued. ‘And he concludes that plant cultivation and agriculture were unknown in the Basin before 1788.’

John bit his lip to hide his surprise. How did Brian know all this? ‘Really,’ he said. The sarcasm was obvious.

‘Planting is the most defining component of agriculture,’ Brian said. ‘And in Central Australia there is no evidence of tilling, sowing, fertilising or irrigation.’

John's heart was thudding with adrenalin. *Can that be right?* he asked himself.

Brian stared at John, his lips quirking. 'Sutton and Walshe say that Peter Latz's lifelong ethnobotanical work in Central Australia found no evidence of cultivation.'

John looked at Brian for an uncomfortably long moment, then turned away angrily.

Brian was unrepentant. 'The Old People were culturally opposed to agriculture – they remained loyal to their own ways.'

The silence lengthened. Carrie looked at John, concerned, but he was staring at his hands.

Brian watched the two young people, as if trying to gauge their reaction to what he was saying. Then he said patiently, 'One-off records of cultivation, or husbandry of some kind, don't equate to a people practising agriculture – the fact that some Aboriginal people harvested seeds, ground them and baked loaves does not make the Old People agriculturists.'

'Really,' John said once more, unwilling to look at his uncle. It unnerved him that Brian seemed to be well-informed, even if he was singing from the same old hymn sheet.

'Yes, really,' Brian said, fixing his eyes on John. 'Prior to 1788 Aboriginal people were practical and spiritual managers of the environment.' He paused for a moment to smoke, then continued. 'They were skilled hunters, expert fishers and trappers, knowledgeable collectors ...'

Carrie glanced at John. His cheeks were flushed.

‘How about a wine?’ she said, reaching for a bottle of red left over from last night.

‘Lovely,’ said Brian.

She went to the sink and rinsed an odd assortment of tumblers then filled them and slid them towards John and his uncle. ‘Cheers,’ she said, raising her glass. Neither man responded.

‘Some did harvest grass seeds and grind them into a paste to cook or eat raw,’ Brian acknowledged. ‘However, they were not farmers who tended fields, sowed crops, and lived in permanent villages.’

John shook his head in disbelief. He lifted his glass, gulped the wine, and said in a slow, deliberate voice, ‘Then how do you account for the stone houses on Gunditjmarra country? Or their eel traps?’

Brian’s mouth twisted in a sceptical smirk. ‘Where?’

‘Gunditjmarra country,’ John repeated, ‘western Victoria, but not just there. What about Rosemary Island – it’s on the Dampier Archipelago of Western Australia? Researchers established the age of one stone building at nine thousand years.’

Brian raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

‘And Herbert Basedow, so-called Aboriginal Chief Protector, left detailed records of houses in the north-east of South Australia. Also, Dennis Foley, of the Gai-Mariagal people north of Port Jackson, saw large dwellings as a child that were built from stone and clay.’

‘So where are they?’ challenged Brian. ‘These houses, I mean.’

‘Foley said many were burnt by soldiers after the smallpox plagues,’ John explained.

‘Huh, that’s convenient.’

They sat in silence for a moment, but John could not let go of the subject. ‘Various structures were erected over graves as well, in different parts of Australia.’

Brian grunted, but said nothing more.

‘How about a little something?’ said Carrie, getting up and going to the fridge. ‘Have we got any of that cheese left, hon?’ she asked.

John shrugged.

‘Yes, we do ... here it is.’ Carrie hunted out some crackers and scattered them around a lump of blue cheese on a floury bread board.

‘Indigenous “dwellings” were apparently constructed for different seasons,’ John said, fixing Brian with a look. ‘Relatively sophisticated structures were built for cold and wet conditions and simple structures were built for warm and dry conditions.’ John said. ‘In dry weather, shelters were built under the shade of trees and in wet conditions more substantial huts, sometimes sealed with mud or clay, were built.’

Brian busied himself with cheese and crackers. Then he nodded slightly in acknowledgement. ‘So are you saying that people built different shelters in the wet and dry seasons, or that people in well-

watered areas stayed in one place for much longer than people in the desert?’

‘The latter,’ John said, as he lifted his glass.

‘But James Morrill, who lived for seventeen years with Aboriginal people around Townsville, said that as the food supply diminished in one place, they travelled to another,’ said Brian. ‘How do you square that with long-term habitation?’

John hesitated, turned towards Carrie and back to Brian, but remained silent.

After a long moment Brian continued. ‘I’m sure you know about William Buckley, the English convict transported to Australia in the early 1800s. He escaped and lived among the Wathaurong people for thirty-two years. These people stayed at different locations for a few days, a few weeks, some months, and often many months – wet-season camps could be occupied for up to six months apparently,’ Brian said.

John nodded. ‘And your point is ...?’

‘Just remember that the word *village* does not necessarily imply permanency.’ Brian paused. ‘It is possible to have permanent housing without permanent dwelling. For example, Sutton and Walshe say that stone structures on High Clifty Island off the Western Australian coast were used throughout the wet season but were not occupied permanently.’

‘Ahuh,’ said John.

Brian noticed the fierce emotion was fading from John’s eyes. There was less tension between them – no doubt the wine helped.

John seemed prepared to listen to what Brian had to say. Irrespective of whether they agreed, the conversation felt more comfortable.

Carrie sensed a shift in the two men's conversation and breathed a sigh of relief.

'The use of stone seems to have been the exception rather than the rule,' Brian said. He pulled out another cigarette and tapped it against the tabletop as he looked at John.

'Have you read Paul Memmott? *The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia*. He says stone dwellings are pretty rare. In fact, most writers describe them as windbreaks in country where there weren't many trees. But you should get hold of a copy of Sutton and Walshe's book. I think you'd find it fascinating.'

John nodded again, but made no move to jot down either title.

'So,' Brian said, 'if you want my opinion, Pascoe is grasping at straws. To generalise from a few examples is wrong.' He got up from his chair and went to the window. The rain had stopped, and the dark clouds seemed to have dissolved. He smiled thinly. Back at his seat, he poured himself more wine and set the bottle on the table in front of him. Then he continued, 'At the risk of repeating myself, the seasons influenced whether people were mobile or sedentary. In the Western Desert people frequently moved in the cooler months, where there were more temporary water sources scattered across the country, then they'd retreat to longer-held camps on more permanent waters in the hot weather.'

John nodded. That made sense.

‘Most huts were low, designed for sitting or lying down in; the height was usually around a metre or less.’ Brian paused again and glanced at John. ‘According to William Buckley, camp sizes in the Western District varied between sixty and two hundred men, women and children.’

‘Are you saying that large camps were not the norm?’ John asked.

‘That’s right.’

John glanced over his uncle’s shoulder at a print of a Paddy Bedford painting on the wall opposite.

Sitting forward, Brian said, ‘Peter Sutton is an anthropologist and a linguist and Keryn Walshe is an archaeologist, so they know their stuff. As I say, their book, *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers* challenges Pascoe on most of his assertions, certainly that prior to 1788 Aboriginal people were agriculturalists. They argue that they were hunters, gatherers, and fishers.’ He sat back in his chair and folded his arms. ‘They claim that prior to 1788, the Indigenous people had developed ways of managing the landscape that went far beyond hunting and gathering but didn’t involve gardening or farming.’

John leaned forward, rested his elbows on the table and said, ‘So what do you say about the journals and diaries of explorers that Pascoe quotes? He says it’s obvious that there were villages from the Kimberley to Cape York, from Hutt River to Tasmania, and from Brewarrina to Hamilton.’

Carrie reached for the book and flipped through until she found what she was looking for. She read, ‘Archaeologists are currently

examining a complex village site in Australia's "dead heart" where the people had a complex water-management system, sophisticated housing, stone quarries, and seed-grinding and storage arrangements.'

Brian again shook his head. 'Where is this so-called village?'

'I can't be sure, but it sounds like an excavation on Mithaka Country in the Channel Country, where they're studying quarries – lots of them – the remains of dwellings, stone arrangements ...'

'Look, Sutton refers to conversations with Aboriginal mentors of over fifty years, many of whom were the last of the generation that had lived off the land. And Walshe is an archaeologist who discusses her fieldwork with Aboriginal collaborators. They know what they're talking about.' Brian's voice had grown louder once more.

John moved further forward in his chair. 'I don't doubt what you say, but why do you believe their sources are any more relevant than the historical journals and diaries of explorers and settlers cited by Pascoe?'

'Those diaries are unreliable. They must be. The explorers could not speak Indigenous languages, and the people they met were nomadic.'

John glanced at Carrie as she pushed the sleeves of her jumper up her forearms as though preparing for a fight. But before she could speak, John continued.

'There's plenty of evidence to support Pascoe's claim that permanent housing and villages existed and were part of the lifestyle of the Indigenous people before Cook's arrival,' John protested.

'Not according to Sutton and Walsh,' Brian replied.

‘But Charles Sturt wrote about his expedition to Cooper’s Creek in 1845,’ replied John. ‘He described three or four hundred natives assembled on the dry floodplain – they brought Sturt and his party water, gave them roasted ducks and offered them a large hut to sleep in.’

Brian frowned, ‘So what’s your point?’

‘I’m saying they were a sophisticated people, far more so than we have been led to believe. On an early expedition, Sturt saw a village of seventy domed huts on the Darling River, each housing up to fifteen people. They were circular, made of strong branches with a thick layer of grass and leaves covered by a coating of clay. They even had doors to exclude insects and were about two and a half to three metres in diameter, and over a metre high. The huts all faced north-west, away from the wind, and each one had a smaller hut attached that was full of produce.’

‘Produce,’ said Brian. ‘For all those preserves and dry goods.’ His voice was scornful.

John cast a glance at Carrie who said, ‘How about the wells in north-west Victoria with bushes twined above them to protect the water, and huts are mentioned over and over.’

‘And ...?’ said Brian.

‘And there’s a description of a series of ring trees on a property near Ballarat. When the trees were saplings, their limbs were trained over each other to form rings, so that, as they grew, the limbs fused and left rounded openings.’

‘But for what purpose?’

‘As markers, maybe for ceremonial purposes ...’ Carrie’s voice trailed away.

‘Sturt wasn’t the only explorer to describe Indigenous dwellings,’ added John. ‘George Goyder, of Goyder-line fame, described a settlement south-west of Lake Blanche in South Australia, with large, warm, comfortable dwellings, the largest holding thirty to forty people.’

‘You guys are laying it on pretty thick,’ sighed Brian, shaking his head.

John shrugged before forging on. ‘A pastoralist by the name of John Conrick wrote in his papers about a wurley over thirty metres in circumference, which was used for holding corroborees.’

‘Like a dance hall?’ asked Brian, unable to suppress a smirk.

‘An Indigenous dance ceremony is closer to a sacred ritual,’ Carrie explained patiently.

Brian extracted another cigarette from the pack.

‘You’ve heard of Thomas Mitchell,’ John said.

‘Of course,’ mumbled Brian as he lit his cigarette and took a long drag. ‘We studied the explorers when I was at school, not this airy-fairy nonsense.’

‘Mitchell discovered several large dwellings near White Lake, close to Gariwerd, or the Grampians as you’d call it, and collections of dwellings near Birdsville.’

‘Unfortunately, Mitchell was no friend of the Indigenous people,’ Carrie said in a low voice.

‘That’s right,’ John replied. ‘Mitchell, like many colonial governors, surveyors, and explorers, always made light of Indigenous achievements. If you use words such as “huts”, instead “buildings”, you diminish Indigenous accomplishments.’

Brian settled back in his seat. ‘You’re giving me the hard sell.’

John smiled. ‘Maybe. But Pascoe’s book is persuasive.’ He took a good mouthful of wine. ‘Look, Uncle Brian, Aboriginal Protector William Thomas wrote that early settlers found an Aboriginal settlement about fifty miles north-east of Port Fairy. In 1840, a sheep station was established on the opposite banks of the creek. One day, while the Blacks were away from their village, the white people set fire to the Aboriginal settlement and destroyed it. By 1841, there was no trace of a single hut along the whole creek. That had been a permanent settlement.’

‘Those were different times,’ grunted Brian.

Carrie shook her head in frustration and riffled through the book once more.’

Brian turned and walked to the window, opening one a crack. The winter wind whistled through the gap, stinging their faces. ‘I needed some air,’ he said by way of explanation. Then, after a moment, he slammed the window shut and returned to his seat. ‘So, what are you telling me? That the deliberate suppression of evidence of permanent Aboriginal settlements has distorted our understanding of Indigenous people and their culture?’

‘Got it in one,’ said John with a nod.

Brian gazed at his nephew and girlfriend across the table. 'I said it before and I'll say it again, I'm not convinced.'

Carrie flipped through the book once more, and said, 'Mitchell wrote in his journal: "a land more favourable for colonisation could not be found".'

'Nobody is pretending the English weren't colonisers,' said Brian, raising his eyes heavenwards.

'Michell was willing to say and do anything so that the colonisers could get their hands on the land.' John paused for a moment and looked up; Carrie's eyes were solemn.

'And the bastard didn't hesitate to murder any Black who got in his way,' John barked.

Brian paused for a long moment and studied John's face, as if trying to decide whether his words had changed John's attitude to Pascoe.

"The underestimation of Indigenous achievement was a deliberate tactic of British colonialism," Carrie read, Before pausing to sip some water. 'To legitimise white intrusion, it was important that Indigenous achievements were ignored.'

Brian was silent for several moments. Then he said with a frown, 'Pascoe's arguments rely on sketchy and isolated scraps of evidence, broad assertions, omissions, speculation, and pure fiction. The book is bursting with selective and misused quotes to bolster his predetermined position and to fit his agricultural model.'

John ran one hand through his hair, but Brian didn't hesitate.

‘Pascoe has a tendency to trim the evidence to fit his agricultural model, ignore the knowledge of his elders and exclude the spiritual philosophy of the Old People’s culture.’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ John said quickly. ‘I—’

~~John sat staring at his uncle, his blank look less combative, more thoughtful, an acknowledgement of what his uncle had said. We’re back on the same side Brian thought to himself, watching John take another sip from his glass.~~

‘Look, we’re family, kiddo. I don’t want there to be trouble between us.’

‘I know,’ said John with the start of a smile. ‘I’ve heard what you’ve said and I’ll give it some serious thought. But for the moment, let’s just agree to disagree, all right, Uncle?’

Brian sighed. ‘Never mind what I say, get the book and read it, then make up your own mind. *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers?* Remember the title.’

John reached for his phone and typed in the title.

‘Maybe we should teach Pascoe *and* Sutton and Walsh in schools and let students consider both sides of the debate and decide for themselves, eh?’ Brian sat back in his chair.

‘Well, we at least agree that we should teach our kids about pre-contact Indigenous culture and life,’ said Carrie with a small smile.

Brian filled the three glasses with what remained of their wine.

‘I can drink to that.’

Material quoted from *Dark Emu* courtesy Bruce Pascoe.

**Bernard Marin AM**

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