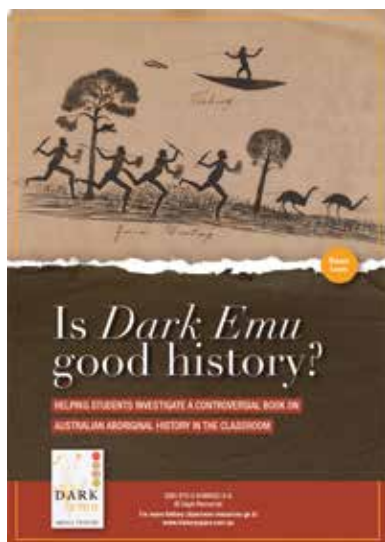


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Is Dark Emu Good History? Helping Students Investigate a Controversial Book on Australian Aboriginal History in the Classroom

By Robert Lewis

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Eagle Resources

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Is Dark Emu Good History? is an education resource created by veteran educational author Robert Lewis in response to the criticisms levelled at *Dark Emu*, a work published by Bruce Pascoe in 2014. It has been designed as a 35-page education resource combining text, primary and secondary sources, downloadable student worksheets and links for further reading.

Lewis opens the resource with:

Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* is a popular and important book that is influencing teachers and students in their knowledge and understanding of Australian Aboriginal history. It has also become highly controversial.

Three important thoughts about Pascoe's *Dark Emu* run through this educational resource.

1. This book is important.
2. This book is influencing teachers and students.
3. This book is controversial.

All are true.

Lewis' primary concerns seem to be with the way in which primary sources have been used to build an argument in *Dark Emu*, and that Pascoe's work has been relied upon too heavily in the teaching of the Victorian History Curriculum. Many criticisms of *Dark Emu* have related to the use of the term 'agriculture', which some have considered the wrong term to use in the context of Aboriginal heritage and land use. The 2014 edition of the book referenced in this article has an emu on the front cover and the title *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* The second edition (published in 2018) was retitled *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*, while a third edition simply reads *Dark Emu*. The reconfiguration of the subtitle and the removal of the question mark offer clues about the book Pascoe set out to write and the way it has been repackaged for a general audience.

Robert Lewis' *Is Dark Emu Good History?* is organised into a series of questions to help students investigate the use of primary and secondary sources in *Dark Emu*. Each question is matched with a piece of historical evidence as used or cited by Pascoe. The evidence

is then presented in its original form. Lewis is a meticulous historian and demonstrates good practice by linking any criticism of the use of primary documents back to the original source. In some instances, the examples seem more pedantic than significant, but most offer good material for class discussion on how historians interpret sources, how interpretations can vary according to the questions asked by the historian, and how the questions and answers may be affected by the historians' preconceptions. The materials also provide a useful working example to students that correct referencing is a very important skill.

The resource presents the critics of *Dark Emu* and their arguments against key elements of the narrative. Lewis is balanced in his presentation of the criticisms. His primary question is whether *Dark Emu* is 'good history'. He also highlights the inner conflict of people who loved the book but question the historical methodology used in researching and writing the narrative.

Contestation is an innate part of history practice and history teaching. Conflicts over historical interpretations are also often taught as a subject at some tertiary institutions. Acknowledging contested claims as a part of the study of history merely reinforces the primary tenets of historical understanding—that history is not a single narrative, and that perspective and bias is part of every source of historical evidence. It also provides the opportunity to model how controversy is best addressed through respectful debate anchored to evidence.

Some of the criticisms directed at Pascoe have been vicious and indeed jaundiced. It is difficult to think of a

similar historical text that has been publicly interrogated to the same degree, and its author attacked on so many levels. It's difficult not to make the connection between the subject matter and the vehemence of the response. However, Robert Lewis' study is not this kind of critique.

The most important lesson from Lewis is that we shouldn't ignore information because it makes us uncomfortable or doesn't sit well with what we want to believe. Teachers and students must remember the centrality of historical inquiry and objectivity, and that the analysis of controversies can easily be turned into teachable moments.

This resource is a useful read for educators teaching all levels of the Victorian History Curriculum, with a specific application for those taking the Level 7-8 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Cultures' unit or VCE Australian History.

If we are teaching students to be critical historians, open to evidence, they must learn to interrogate all sources. This can be demonstrated by getting students to think critically about Lewis' education resource and responding to questions such as:

- what is the purpose of this resource?
- why is there a need for resources such as these?
- do you think it is leading the reader to think a certain way about the issue? Why? Why not?

- has reading this resource changed your thinking on any issues? How?

Like the original *Dark Emu* book, Lewis' response should be introduced with caution and pedagogical scaffolding. This resource highlights the importance of academic freedom, but teachers must take care that it is not used to fan the flames of racial dissonance or to disregard the important historical or cultural work undertaken by Pascoe. Teaching history is a nuanced undertaking. It is vital that students focus on the practice of respectful historical dialogue and nurture an understanding that written history is a combination of fact and interpretation.

Is Dark Emu Good History? helps teachers reflect on their own practice when it comes to learning and teaching historical knowledge. Pascoe's book has been such a revelation for educators who are constantly looking for resources that reflect Aboriginal life prior to colonisation. Consequently, there has perhaps been an over-reliance on *Dark Emu* by teachers, as Lewis suggests. It is important to remember that no matter how compelling the resource, a good History teacher will draw on a variety of both primary and secondary sources to learn about a topic and create a unit of work.

Is Dark Emu Good History? Helping Students Investigate a Controversial Book on Australian Aboriginal History in the Classroom is available from the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM).¹

1 <https://theeducationshop.com.au/books/is-dark-emu-good-history/>