

The Possums, The Man, and The Tree

An Aboriginal legend from
the Richmond River, N.S.W.

As told by: The late Mr. Lyle Roberts

To: Mildred Norledge

There was once a tree growing and well did it grow. It had on it much fruit which the black possum is very fond of, and many were the possums that lived in this tree.

Now this tree was the Djurabil (totem) of a young man, and no one could go near it and get the possums except the young man himself. But it so happened that the uncle of the young man wondered where and how his nephew could always get a possum whenever he wanted it. So the uncle bethought he would watch where his nephew went . . . This he did . . .

For many days and many nights he wondered why he should not go to the tree, and get a possum whenever he wanted it, as did his nephew—Get a possum from the tree that was the Djurabil of the young man.

Then, one night when his nephew was sleeping, the uncle got up and quietly left the camp and went to the tree in which there were many possums. He began to talk to the possums—by making the sounds that the possums make when they talk amongst themselves. But the possums, when they saw him, knew straightaway that he was not the young man, for they had seen him coming, and when he came near to the tree one of the possums said :—NING WOO NAH (which means “be silent”) and silent the possums were.

Now, because none of the possums would come to the uncle of the young man when he talked to them, he picked up the tree and carried it away with the possums in it as well. Far, very far, did he walk, carrying the tree. He came to the river and this he crossed, taking the tree with him ; the tree in which there were many possums.

The nephew of the old man awakened, and found that his uncle had gone from the camp. “This is strange”, he thought, “that my uncle should go away from the camp in the night. He is not doing that which is good, going away like this at night—I know he is doing that which is wrong. I will seek him and find him.”

So the nephew set forth from the camp to seek and find his uncle whither he had gone.

It so happened that while the uncle of the young man was carrying the tree one of the possums jumped out of the tree, as the uncle was passing by the hill, and when the nephew passed by the hill the possum came to him, for it knew him.

Now when the possums in the tree beheld that the nephew was following his uncle they began to make a noise, for they knew him—knew that he was coming to the tree that was his Djurabil.

And as the uncle again came to the river he began to cross it. But his nephew was now there too, for he had come close to the old man and he was very angry. So great was his anger that his uncle had pulled up the tree which was his Djurabil, he grabbed hold of the tree and forthwith drowned his uncle then and there.

To this day can be seen the place in the ground where the tree was growing—the tree which was the Djurabil of the young man—and where the uncle pulled it up. You can see that he did so by the shape and the depth of the hole. See that there—there was once a tree growing, a tree in which the black possum liked to live.

This is the story of the possums, the man, and the tree.



Mathew James Fisher, a former champion boxer and horseman. In his prime Mathew was also a champion platelayer for the Railways Department