

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ASTRONOMY

By J. G. GRIFFIN

IT is, of course, but a twice-told tale, to repeat that from a time too remote to be known, the heavens have been conventionally divided into fabulous groups consisting of stars which record the poetry, the religious symbols, the heroic deeds, no less than the baser passions of peoples whose very names have perished; but, so long lived is legend, so forceful is habit, that, wherever throughout the world civilized men now watch the skies, they still conform to these same picturesque if unmeaning figures and designations. It was the Greeks of old—

“the radiant people

That ever enraptured the world with dreams of melodious grace,”—

who, embellishing with a richer and more varied imagery the traditions brought to them from a distant age, have founded a universal language for the most delightful as it is the least selfish of all the sciences. But the Greeks and their forerunners were not the only mortals to see visions and dream dreams. All savage communities have had and still have legends concerning the people, animals and what not which they assume to find amongst the stars. The Australian aboriginals hold several such, and, better than all the rest, they possess the singular distinction of being the only people who have imagined a black constellation. This is called by them and now by us, perhaps somewhat derisively, the constellation of the Emu. Most people know that in Australia there is a large ratite bird, the *Dromaeus novae hollandiae*, called generally “Emu”, which is said to be the name given to it by the natives when the first European settlers questioned them, but which does not occur in any of the myths concerning the bird with which the writer is acquainted. Sometimes it is incorrectly called a cassowary. It is of very dark-grey, almost black, hair-like plumage, with a small head, long neck, high and powerful legs, three-toed feet and short useless wings, and is now being gradually extinguished in the more settled districts of our island continent.

The so-called constellation may be clearly seen in the southern skies from March to May on a moonless night. It is chiefly composed of the dark nebulous formation known as the "Coal Sack" close to the Southern Cross, which represents the body of the bird; from it there are several wisps and lanes of opaque matter which twine and twist in and about the Milky Way in that region of the sky, and these form the slender neck and long legs of the figure. Some imagination is of course required to make it out, but not more than is necessary when tracing many another group in the northern hemisphere.

The Emu, *i.e.*, the bird itself, has various designations amongst the natives, but in that portion of Australia from whence the following legend comes, is known as *Tchingal*.

On one occasion Tchingal was roaming about looking for food and came across an opossum (*Banya*) doing the same thing. Banya had a bundle of spears in his hands which he used for killing such smaller animals or birds as he wanted. When Tchingal saw Banya he immediately gave chase and the latter, impeded by his weapons, was being quickly overtaken, when, casting the spears at the foot of a large tree, he ran up its trunk to a branch beyond Tchingal's reach. Suddenly two natives, noted hunters, who had watched what was going on, seizing Banya's spears, set upon Tchingal and killed him. The King of heaven, who was also an onlooker, now exercised his supernatural powers and caught both Tchingal and Banya up into the sky, making the former's body the coal sack and his long legs the black streams which spread from it through the Galaxy thereabouts. The points of the spears which killed Tchingal are Alpha and Beta Crucis, one passes through his neck and the other through his thighs. Banya was transformed into Gamma Crucis and thus can forever watch his enemy should he again try to capture him.

The Origin of the Sun

M. Arnold van Gennep in his "Mythes et Légendes D'Australie",—an excellent collection from various authors—says: "Dans toute l'Australie le soleil est une femme" (In all Australia the sun is a female). This is certainly the case, and a diligent search in every available direction confirms the statement. There

are several accounts of the birth of the sun, of which the following is one of the clearest.

Before men existed the earth was in darkness except for such light as the stars and moon afforded, for the latter preceded the sun. There were however plenty of animals, birds and fishes, most of whom lived in a perpetual state of quarrelling and fighting one with the other for food, which, then as now, was difficult to procure. One such trouble arose on the Murrumbidgee plain between Dinewan (the Emu) and Bralgah (the Native Companion, the largest Australian crane—*Grus Australasianus*). Dinewan had laid an egg in her nest on the ground, which Bralgah, who had been watching, by some stratagem managed to steal. He flew away with it and going right up into the sky placed it upon a heap of fire-wood in the form of a woman and called by the natives Gnowee, which by some unexplained process had there been collected. The contact of the egg with the heap caused the latter to burst into flame, thus giving, for the first time, light in daytime to the world. The King of heaven, sometimes called *Nugurundere*, was so pleased with this that he ordered his attendants to go forth and gather wood in every direction, that the fire might be kept up, but he commanded them only to light it in the mornings when a bright star appeared in the east. He also warned the animals on earth to look out for the star, that they might know when the heap was about to be lit. Most of them were too lazy to do this, and another expedient occurred to *Nugurundere*. There is in Australia a bird, familiar to everyone and known as the laughing-jackass, from the peculiar shrill and loud note he makes when singing. He is known as the kookuburra (*Dacelo gigas*) and is one of the king-fishers, but is better remembered by his habit of killing snakes. The King of heaven determined to make use of kookuburra's song and told him that, just as the star was appearing, he was to make as much noise as he could so that there should be no excuse for the birds and animals not being "up and doing" when the big light appeared. Kookuburra of course obeyed and thus the animals had no excuse for laziness.

In the early morning, when first the heap is set afire, the heat is not great, but as noon approaches and the main body is alight it becomes so fierce that none of the animals can move in the open;

towards evening, as the wood is consumed, coolness and darkness gradually prevail and so they can again go forth for food. Shortly after this the Daens, *i.e.*, the aboriginals, appeared on earth, and were told never to permit their children to copy the voice of koo-kuburra, especially at night-time, for fear of creating a false presage of dawn. Should they do so, however, darkness would again envelop the world and they would themselves be punished by the growth of a large tooth above their ordinary teeth, which would for ever be a mark of their disobedience !

The Moon

It is clear that the moon has always been looked upon as a man by the Australian natives, with the single exception of the Narrinyerri tribe in the Encounter Bay district, who describe her as a woman and one of no particular virtue. For many days she remained amongst men, but the hardships she suffered reduced her to a mere skeleton. The King of heaven, Nurrunduri (compare Nugurundere in the myth of the sun), becoming angry with her for her misbehaviour and disliking her attenuation, ordered her to be driven away. She flies and for some days is secreted, but while hidden is really digging roots of a marvellously nourishing character, from the consumption of which she gradually fills out and becomes fat again. While thus improving in condition she now and then shows herself for part of the night and ultimately, when her complete strength has been regained, for the whole night as the full moon. Soon afterwards she falls away and little by little relapses into her old forlorn life.

There would seem however to be another reason for the King of heaven's treatment of the moon. He (for now Luna is transformed in gender) was originally a native-cat called Mityan (*Dasyurus Geoffroyi*) who fell in love with Unurgunite's wives (observe that the name of the King is essentially the same with some slight alteration, due probably to the ears of the recorders!) and while endeavouring to induce her to run away with him is discovered by Unurgunite. A great fight follows, ending in the defeat of Mityan, who, unable to find repose anywhere has been kept wandering about the sky ever since as the moon.

In the Northern territory of Australia the aborigines consider that in the ancient times (called by them Jabulunga) the moon was a man named sometimes Kandanuk and sometimes Murtgijina. For many years he lived in a great cave on the side of a mountain far away to the west of a district known as Laguning. When he died his spirit, and that of an old kangaroo (inumbe go) which he owned and of three of his hunting dogs were translated into the sky and became the moon, in which, at the full, you can see the old fellow and his associates. The full moon is called by these people Igul, the half moon Idadad and the new or crescent Wurdu. Moonrise is Ijumna, moon set Yagadjun. The spirit of a living man is called Yibi, of a dead man Yungeba.

Another account of the legend is held by people called the Larrikiya tribe at Port Darwin, North Australia. Nanganburra lives in the bowels of the earth and is the originator of all the blacks, who, when they die go to his abode. If they have behaved properly, he gives them a pass to Mangarrara with whom they live among the stars. On the other hand, the wicked are sent to the interior of the earth to a place called Omar where there is always a large fire burning. Deep below the fire is a great lake called Burcoot, where an immensely powerful black always lives. His name is Madjuj-madjuit. He is a friend of Mangarrara and regulates the tides (they rise 40 feet at Port Darwin) by means of the moon, which never dies. In another part of Australia, where the natives had become impoverished, there was born of a virgin a good and wise man called Wyungare who gave them weapons and taught them sorcery. After a time Wyungare dies and is taken to Heaven where he becomes the second greatest person and shines as the moon.

It will at once occur to the reader that the two myths have a close connection with European knowledge and tradition. The great rise in the tides at Port Darwin may have caused the early English settlers to tell the blacks that the moon was working well and thus they fortified their old story by including his (for he was a male to them) power regarding the heaped-up waters. The second allusion, that to the virgin-birth, could easily have been derived from early missionaries, possibly from either the Dutch or Spaniards who were in these waters long before the English.

The Pleiades

As with the Greeks so with the Australian aborigines the Pleiades are favourite objects upon which to frame a story, and are always considered to be seven young women. There are many variants of this myth, one of the most complete being that held by a tribe in Riverina called Noongaburrah. It seems that a man named Wurrannah, flying from a hostile party whom he had injured in some way, came to a camp where seven sisters dwelt, whose tribal name was Meamei. They were hospitable, gave him food and drink and allowed him to remain in their camp that night. Next morning he said he would go on his journey, but, having made up his mind to get one or two of them for wives, hid in the dense scrub hard by until the girls had left camp. The blacks are very fond of ants' eggs and the Meamei girls were provided with specially shaped sticks to enable them to dig out both yams and the ants' nests and secure the ants' eggs. This they proceeded to do, working away in the soil until midday. Then carelessly throwing their sticks down in the open they trailed off to the shade of some large trees and made a meal of what they had secured and then, *sine mora*, slept the sleep of the just. Wurrannah knew their habits, and when they were sleeping took two of the sticks and made off with them. Towards evening the seven, walking over to take up their tools, could find only five. The five girls who each claimed one, took them and returned to the camp, leaving two behind to search for those that were missing. Wurrannah had fixed these two sticks firmly in the ground at some distance away, but the girls soon saw where they were and rushed off to take them home. However Wurrannah had taken the precaution of hammering the sticks so tightly into the ground that the poor girls strove in vain to move them, and while they were thus struggling, he came along and captured them both, and ordered them to accompany him as his wives. Grieved at the loss of their sisters and weak and powerless, they were compelled to obey, and after the manner of the blacks, became his beasts of burden and the providers of his food. Upon one occasion, after there had been a heavy fall of rain making everything moist, he directed them to light a fire and cook some flesh. They tried to do so but everything was so damp

that the fire would not burn. Grumbling at the delay he ordered them to obtain some of the bark of neighbouring pine trees and thus make a blaze. "No," said the two, "if we cut pine bark you will never see us again." "Go and do as I tell you," he cried. "Well," they replied, "if we do you will lose us." "Go!" he shouted, "and don't talk!" Each girl, then, taking a *combo* (a stone tomahawk), selecting a couple of trees close together, drove their *combos* simultaneously into them. Hardly had they done so when the trees began to rise out of the ground taking the girls with them. No screaming or ordering that Wurrannah indulged in was of any avail, for the trees gradually ascended higher and higher until they reached the sky. Upon touching the blue vault the two girls were surprised and rejoiced to hear their five sisters calling to them, and when they answered, the five sisters thrust out their hands and pulled them from the trees and gathered them into their arms. The seven reunited Meamei remained in heaven and can be seen as the Pleiades to this day.

A variant of this is, that the Pleiades are a group of young girls called Karat (group) Goruk (female) who were digging up ants' eggs with their yam sticks, at the ends of which Wearg, the crow, had fixed some live coals of fire that he had stolen for them. Bellinbellin (the musk-crow) at the command of Bunjil, the great father of all, who was very angry at this, opened a large bag he always possessed, and sent out a great whirlwind. This swept the girls right into heaven where they remain as the Pleiades, still carrying fire at the ends of their yam-sticks.

The latest account of the Pleiades myth has come this year from Mrs. D. M. Bates, who lives and is the Commonwealth principal in charge of an aboriginal camp at a place called Oldea on the edge of the Nullabor* Plains. Her home is some distance north of the long East-West railway between Perth and Adelaide, a few hundred miles away from the head of the Great Australian Bight. From her account of the manners, habits, ideas and legends of these natives the following is gathered. The Ming-arri are a flock of small animals known as the mountain devils, quite harm-

*Nullabor—an enormous treeless plain 10,000 square miles in extent. The name is said to be derived from the Latin for "no tree" (*nulla arbor*) but the writer thinks it is of aboriginal derivation.

less little creatures. They were supposed to be all women who lived by themselves and refused to have anything to do with men. In order to keep to themselves they kept a pack of dingoes (the native dog, *canis dingo*) who killed and ate most of the men and drove away the rest, who attempted to reach the Ming-arri. Nyiruna was a great hunter in those days, who desired to obtain the Ming-arri for his wives. He left food for them and tried in many ways to tempt them to come to him, but was always prevented by the dogs from doing so. He pestered the women so greatly that by some means both he and they were translated to the sky. They became the Pleiades and Nyiruna was turned into a star and in the shape of Orion continually chasing the Ming-arri, but never overtaking them.

Another curious tale of the Pleiades comes from the extreme north of Australia. In York Peninsula the sisters still compose this cluster, but one of them, the faintest of the seven, came down to earth and married an aboriginal named Canggoolgeenya but was brought back to heaven by her father, the large star Alcoling-ga, probably Aldebaran. As if ashamed of her behaviour she continually tries to hide and is thus the faintest of the seven. This Professor A. Metson, who narrates the myth, deems nearly identical with the Greek legend, to which it certainly has some resemblance.

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