

Preface (INCOMPLETE)

This is essentially a story about Snoopy, a bushy-tail possum who, because of an early physical disability, had to live in two worlds, human and possum. But Snoopy's predicament can be appreciated only in the context of possums as a whole, and in the context of her own history and personality. Her story was played out in possum terms, and in order to understand what is going on you have to know what possum terms are. As I found when I was looking for her when she was lost, most people do not know what they are, so the book had to 'grow' to explain about possums before the action could begin, essentially by a series of answers to the questions people asked me - Where do possums go in the daytime? Why do they fight so much? Why are they so often killed on the roads? How do they get on with dogs and cats? And so on.

This is not intended as an academic textbook. I have research qualifications in another subject area, but none whatsoever in zoology or ethology or any of the other appropriate disciplines. It was commenced, and the bulk of it originally written, in 1975, while I under great stress, looking for a lost animal, and written for the most part from memory, not from my notes. It is, however, reasonably accurate: when I checked back with my notes, inaccuracies were of the order of saying that Sherry popped a piece of bread, instead of a piece of carrot, into her baby's mouth; quite a deal of the final section was written, literally, as it happened before my eyes, generally on my window sill, occasionally on the typewriter itself.

I have been told that some of my observations are, coincidentally, of academic value, since the particular behaviour concerned has not been observed before. For this reason I have endeavoured to make some reasonable gestures towards academic standards, and indicate how I know what I know. As indicated in Part I, the books available to me at the time for the most part either did not deal with the questions to which I wanted answers, or manifestly did not apply to the particular possums with which I was dealing.

Since I cannot cite books, I have had to cite possums, 'case studies', for the most part in the notes; since the book is aimed primarily at the general reader, these have been given in the form of anecdotes, rather than scientific observations. I hope that my academic colleagues will forgive this, and be able to cut through the literary trappings to the data; I have copious notes down to the time of Snoopy's first disappearance, more sporadic notes thereafter, and a fairly complete genealogical record of the Newport and Ingleside possums over a period of approximately twelve years, with a more desultory record thereafter, and I would be delighted to make this available to anyone with a serious interest, and, to the best of my ability, answer any questions that I can.

Possums seem to think in very clearcut, simple terms, in extremes, in black and white with few shades of grey, in capital letters, as it were. Things are either absolutely wonderful or totally appalling, galvanizingly interesting or boring to the point of rigidity, and so on. For this reason I have capitalised possum concepts in the text - along with a few human concepts which seem to me to be equally simplistic.

Some books available in public libraries at the time were of use, among them principally the non-academic book by Paule Ridpath, *Possum Moods* (Sydney, Ure Smith 1967), *Edwards (???), Basil Marlow, *Marsupials of Australia* (Brisbane, The Jacaranda Press, no date), Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring* (London, Pan, 1957) and *On Aggression* (London, Methuen, 1966) and, at a later date at Ingleside, Jane van Lawick-Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (London, Collins, 1971). I would also like to thank, in particular, Malcolm Smith, then of Macquarie University, who read a large proportion of the book in 1976, and gave me invaluable scientific advice.

I should, however point out that any academic delinquencies included are mine, not his, since I have on occasion ignored his advice. The book is, in the last analysis, a record of my experiences, and so must comprise my observations at the time, however flawed they may have been. I would also like to thank all the long-suffering vets who have helped me with the possums over the years, especially Bob Bradley, and all the other people who have encouraged and chivvied me to keep going and finish the book.

To anticipate some `slings and arrows' already aimed at my head, I am not writing this book to make money for myself. A great deal of my information was obtained when I was canvassing the district, pestering people; I told them that I was looking for a lost animal, not collecting information for a book, and so, while many in fact said, `You should write a book,' it would be improper to do so. I shall not be taking any money from this book, beyond a nominal amount for immediate expenses such as stationary. Any profits it may happen to generate will be directed to a trust fund to preserve the Newport property as a sanctuary for the native wildlife, including, of course, the descendants of Jenny, Foxy, Mrs. Poss and the other characters in the story.