

# D'haraawal

## DREAMING STORIES

**Frances Bodkin**

**Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

*Illustrated by Lorraine Robertson*

### **Woo'rah**

**How the Water Rat Came to Be.**



# Woo'rah

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# Foreword

Throughout the past two hundred years, society has come to regard the Koori Dreaming stories as something akin to the fairy stories they were told as children.

However, for thousands upon thousands of years, the stories in this book were used as a teaching tool to impart to the youngest members of the clans the laws which governed the cultural behaviour of clan members. The successive attempts to destroy the Koori culture and assimilate The People into the Euro-centric population were unsuccessful, and the Dreaming Stories were able to continue in their disguise as charming legends where animals became the heroes and the heroines.

Historians and anthropologists have studied the Koori culture since they first arrived on this continent, and have come to the conclusion that the D'harawal culture is dead. Of, course, this has been done without reference to the descendants of that culture, and without even asking the proper questions. The D'harawal culture is not dead, it is a strong, living, vital culture of the Sydney and South Coast regions that just had to go underground for a while to be able to survive. Now that the right questions have been asked, we have the key to unlock a vast wealth of knowledge of this part of the country in which we live.

It is difficult to explain to a society based on commerce fuelled by the profit motive, that D'harawal culture is not based on the ownership of tangible things like land and dwellings and possessions, but it does have a very strong sense of ownership of information. That information, particularly in story form, was not traded, but could be given, and given freely, but its ownership was respected, those stories were not told or passed on by those to whom they had been given, but the knowledge in them was used by the receiver whilst ever they walked in the Land of the D'harawals, This Land.

It is hoped that our present society is now mature enough to be able to accept the Koori Dreaming stories as they were, as they are, and as they were always destined to be; tools to teach the Children of The People about living with Earth, the Mother, in peace and harmony.

Each story contains several layers of knowledge, the first of which are the secrets. Which can only be passed on or discussed with persons of the same level of knowledge or higher than the story teller. These secrets are never told within a legend, but are remembered separately from the legend itself. These are very important components of any legend, and it is the knowledge of the secrets which determines the level of the person's worthiness to ownership of that story.

The next layer of knowledge within the stories was the law, or laws, to be obeyed. The laws of the stories were told and often repeated after the telling of each story, after which the laws were discussed and their application in life demonstrated in a variety of ways.

The third layer of knowledge contained in each story was the lessons which could be learned from the story and the lessons were taught to all members of the group as well as visitors. These lessons introduced Peoples to the means to live in harmony with each other, and the land and its resources.

In this series of D'harawal Law Legends, there are many lessons to be learned. The D'harawals believed that children learned better and more quickly when they were encouraged to work through a problem, rather than be told the answer. By sharing the stories of our ancestors with you, it is hoped that not only will you recognise and learn the lessons and laws of the Peoples of This Land, but you will also come to understand and respect the culture of The People and our feelings and relationship with the land.

The stories do not in themselves act as an instruction manual - rather they point the way and encourage The People to think, to learn and to live. It is hoped that by sharing our stories, you too may be able to think, to learn and to live in This Land.

With understanding and respect for each other we can learn to more easily share This Land and live together in peace and harmony.

*Frances Bodkin*

# Woo'rah

## How the Water Rat Came to Be.

A very long time ago, there lived on the Barra'woori a man of the possum clan, called Gumara. Now Gumara was a tall, handsome man, who was a good fisherman and canoe builder. In fact, Peoples came from far and wide to learn his secret of making canoes that did not turn over in rough seas and throw their occupants into the cold waters.

Now, apart from being a fisherman and a canoe maker, Gumara was also a lawman and it was his duty to guard the secrets of the Mai'mel. This he did, dutifully. In all manner of things, Gumara was an honourable person.

But Gumara was very lonely. Although the mothers of many young women would have welcomed him as their son-in-law, he eyes did not look at their daughters with love or with longing. So he continued to work busily at making canoes that would not turn over in the waves, hardly looking up as a pretty girl wandered by to watch his work or to pass the time of day with him in the hope that he would look upon her face with pleasure.

Then, one day, when he was trying out a special canoe, one that was flat, instead of curved, one that allowed the waves to wash over it, rather than fill with water and turn over and sink, he heard a laugh, and he looked down to see a woman swimming beside him in the water.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, her eyes were bright and brown, and her skin so smooth that it looked like the fine fur of the seal. Her teeth were sharp and white and her smile enchanted him. Gumara had fallen in love.

Gumara gladly helped her onto his canoe, and together they paddled back to the Mai'mel where she helped him carry the canoe up the cliffs to his camp on the top of the Barra'woori. All this time she had not said a word, only smiling at him when he asked her a question. Now this puzzled Gumara, he knew that she understood what he said, because when he asked her where she came from, she pointed out to sea.

When he was about to cook some fish for her, she shook her head, and ate the fish raw. Gumara tried this, but found the raw fish not to his taste, so he continued to cook his fish.

He asked her if she wished to stay the night, but she once again pointed out to sea, and, as the sun set she made her way down the cliff and slipped into the sea. Gumara watched her swim away until he could no longer see her dark head bobbing amongst the waves, then sadly made his way back up to his camp again.

As the sun rose next morning Gumara was awakened by the woman shaking his toe. With great joy in his heart Gumara set about working on his canoe aided by his new companion. But he knew that as the sun set she would, once again, return to the sea. For many seasons, Gumara and his beautiful companion worked at building canoes for The People, and at the same time making sure that the laws were properly kept in the Barra'woori.

Then, one day, Gumara awakened, the sun high in the sky. He looked around, expecting to see his loved one, but she was not there. He ran to the top of the cliff and stared out to sea, but there was nothing, only the waves constantly throwing themselves against the Mai'mel.

Gumara was distraught, he ran along the clifftop, his heart aching, but there was no sign of the woman he called Darawun.

With great sadness in his heart he applied himself to making the canoes even better than before, and in making sure the laws were kept, not only in the Barra'woori, but also in the Banarong.

Then, one morning he had an idea, and taking his canoe, and a roll of strong twine, he made his way down the cliff to the sea, then he paddled out to sea to the place where he had first seen his beloved one. Tying one end of the twine to his wrist and the other end to a special hole in the flat canoe, he dived into the water, searching for Darawun, and staying under the water until he could no longer hold his breath.

All day he searched, but did not find any sign of her.

Every day, after carrying out his duties, Gumara went down to the sea to search for his beloved, and every day he came back to his camp, lonely and disappointed.

Time passed, and every day Gumara carried out his duties, then went down to the sea to search for Darawun, then one day, whilst under the water, he came face to face with Booambillye, the Great Shark Spirit. "You are not in your Country." Booambillye challenged him. "Why do you come here if not to declare war upon my People?"

Gumara almost swallowed the sea in fright. “I am searching for my beloved one.” He replied. “She came to me from the sea, and she returned to the sea. I cannot live happily without her.”

Boo’ambillye sniffed at Gumara. “You smell like food to My People.” She commented. “Even my mouth waters at the thought of tasting you.”

Gumara was amazed, he was not afraid, and he felt that he did not need to breathe. “Many of my People have provided a meal for your People, just as many of your People have provided a meal for my People.” He replied. “I bear you no ill will.”

Boo’ambillye sighed. “That is the way it is.” She said. “Your loved one will return to you. She was enchanted by a sorcerer who wanted to punish her, and he turned her into a human during the day. During the night she returned to her own form, that of a seal.” The Great Shark smiled. “She adapted to her new form quite successfully. Too successfully, much to the annoyance of the sorcerer. She will bring your child with her when next she comes.”

Gumara choked with surprise, and Boo’ambillye had to help him to his canoe, and coughing and spluttering he laid on the flat canoe. “I thank you for your help and advice, Great One.” He said.

Boo’ambillye smiled, showing her sharp teeth. “I like you, and I can see why Darawan loves you enough to give up her life in the sea.” She said, then sighed. “If you teach your children never to eat my People, I will teach my People never to eat your children.”

Gumara made a solemn promise to The Great Shark, he could not believe that this was happening to him.

“Keep in your canoe a small fire, when we show our fins above the water, throw into the water one of those things you use to make light.” She indicated the Kuritjah cones that he kept in a basket on his canoe. “We will know then, that they are the Woo’rah, the children of the Gumara and the Darawun.”

And Darawun did return to him, with the most beautiful baby girl Gumara had ever seen. Never again did she leave him to return to the sea, and they and their children lived together happily in

the Barra'woori, becoming famous for their canoes, and their ability to swim underwater for long distances.

That is why the Water Rat, which is really a swimming possum, is the law-keeper of the waters of the Gwaigal, and why the People of the Possum and Water Rat clans always carry fire in their canoes.

And that is why sometimes the Great Seal Spirit comes to visit the Parra'woori to see how her grandchildren, the Water Rats, are keeping the law of the waters and the land.

And when the Great Seal Spirit appears in the waters of the Mai'mel, none may harm her..

# Some Information about the animals in the story:

## Woo'rah

## Water Rat

*Hydromys chrysogaster*

The Water-rat is one of Australia's largest rodents and is usually found near permanent bodies of water.

Well adapted to aquatic life with its webbed hind feet and waterproof coat, the Water-rat can be identified by its large size and long tail with a white tip. The main characteristics that help distinguish the Water-rat from other rodents include: Front teeth: One pair of distinctive chisel shaped incisors with hard yellow enamel on front surfaces. Head: Flattened head, long blunt nose, with abundant whiskers, small eyes. Ears: Notably small ears. Colouring: Variable. Near-black, grey to brown, with white to orange belly. Thick soft waterproof fur. Main feature: webbed hind-feet. Tail: Thick, white-tipped.

**Size range:** Body 231 mm - 370 mm, tail 242 mm - 345 mm, weight 340 g - 1275 g.

**Distribution:** The Water-rat is found in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia (south-west and north), Northern Territory.

**Habitat:** The Water-rat is one of Australia's largest rodents and is usually found near permanent bodies of fresh or brackish water. The Water-rat is one of Australia's only two amphibious mammals (the platypus is the other). They live in burrows alongside river and lake banks.

**Feeding and Diet:** The Water-rat feeds on a wide range of prey including large insects, crustaceans, mussels and fishes, and even frogs, lizards, small mammals and water birds. It forages by swimming underwater. Once it catches its prey, it usually carries it back to a regular feeding site.

Although native rodents are usually nocturnal, the Water-rat is most active around sunset and may even forage during the day.

The burrow is usually hidden among vegetation and built along the banks of rivers and lakes. The round entrance has a diameter of about 15 cm. In dense populations, males are territorial and defend their areas aggressively. In these circumstances, it is common to see Water-rats with damaged tails as a result of these fights.

During the depression in the 1930s, a ban was placed on the import of furred skins (mostly American Muskrat). The Water-rat was seen as a perfect substitute and the price of a Water-rat pelt increased from four shil-

lings in 1931 to 10 shillings in 1941. The species was heavily hunted during this time until protective legislation was introduced. Populations seem to have made a recovery.

The main threats to the Water-rat today are habitat alteration as a result of flood mitigation and swamp drainage, and predation by introduced animals such as cats and foxes

- See more at: <http://australianmuseum.net.au/water-rat#sthash.hhv1X2MI.dpuf>

## Gumara

### Brushtail Possum

Scientific name: *Trichosurus*

The Common Brushtail Possum is probably the best known of the possums in Sydney because it has adapted to urban living and often comes into contact with people.

Size range: 55 cm

Distribution: Common Brushtail Possums are found in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and Northern Territory. Also found in New Zealand.

Habitat: Common Brushtail Possums live in urban areas, forests and woodlands and heath.

Feeding and Diet: In the wild, the Common Brushtail Possum's diet consists of leaves, blossoms and fruits, but in suburbia it will eat almost anything.

The Common Brushtail Possum is nocturnal and, during the day, retreats to a hollow log, branch, tree trunk or any dark area, even inside house roofs.

Communication: The Common Brushtail Possum is a social animal and remains in contact with its group through sounds and scents. At times, particularly during the breeding season, it makes piercing screeches in the middle of the night to establish territories and warn of danger.

The Common Brushtail Possum's main predators include Dingoes, pythons, foxes and cats.

The Common Brushtail Possum was introduced to New Zealand in the 1830s where it has now become a pest species. In Australia, it is a protected species.

- See more at: <http://australianmuseum.net.au/common-brushtail-possum#sthash.hqMyoPei.dpuf>

## Darawun

### Australian Fur Seal

*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*

The Australian Fur Seal is the largest fur seal found in Australian waters.

Fur seals have large eyes, a pointed face with whiskers and sharp teeth. The Australian Fur Seal, *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus* is the largest of all the fur seals. It has a broad head, pointed snout and long backward sweeping facial vibrissae (whiskers). The body is robust and covered in thick brown layered hair except on the front and back flippers. The Australian Fur Seal is sexually dimorphic (males and females are visibly different). The males are larger than the females and when mature carry a dark mane of coarse hair. They have a set of carnivore-like teeth similar to those of a large dog or bear. Like all members of the Family Otariidae (Fur seals and sea lions) they can raise their body onto their front flippers to move around on land.

Size range: Length: 135 cm - 227 cm; Weight: Males: 218 kg - 360 kg; Females: 41 kg - 113 kg

Distribution: The Australian Fur Seal has a relatively restricted distribution around the islands of Bass Strait, parts of Tasmania and southern Victoria. They can be seen hauling out (coming ashore) on islands off South Australia and areas of southern New South Wales such as Montague Island with the occasional animal appearing as far north as the mid north coast of New South Wales.

As it is closely related to the South African Fur Seal, its populations worldwide are reasonably secure although it is occasionally commercially hunted in South Africa. In Australia it is fully protected although its numbers are probably still only half those of the historic pre sealing days. It continues to be vulnerable to disturbance at its breeding sites and suffers some losses as a result of conflict with commercial fishing operations.

Habitat: Australian Fur Seals frequent coastal waters and oceans. Their preferred habitat especially for breeding is rocky islands, which include boulder or pebble beaches and gradually sloping rocky ledges.

Feeding and Diet: Australian Fur Seals feed on a variety of bony fish species plus squid and octopus. They are voracious and skilful hunters in the water and are not adverse to taking advantage of situations where fish are corralled by nets and fish farms.

With its streamlined shape and strong flippers, the Australian Fur Seal is an agile swimmer and can dive to depths of 200 m to catch fishes and squids. Despite its cumbersome appearance, it is also quite mobile on land, even over rocky terrain.

Fur seals differ from other seals (true seals) because they have external ears and the ability to use all four limbs to move across land. Also, fur seals have two layers of fur while other seals have only one layer.

Mating and reproduction: Australian Fur Seals come ashore each year and form breeding colonies. The adult males come ashore first and establish territories. Females congregate within these areas and are defended by the resident male often with considerable aggression towards the females and other males. Females spend most of the gestation period at sea, coming ashore just before the birth of a single pup (sometimes two) between October and December. Females generally mate again 6 - 10 days later.

The Australian Fur Seal has what is referred to as 'delayed implantation', which means the fertilised egg remains dormant for some time before implanting and resuming development. This ensures that the pups will always be born in summer when chances of survival are highest because of the warmer weather and abundant food supply.

The pup population suffers a high mortality rate in those first two months of life especially when the mothers are away at sea feeding. Pups are weaned at four to six months old but may still remain with the mother for a further six months or more.

Predators: In the wild, seals are eaten by several species of sharks including the White Shark.

During the 1800s the Australian Fur Seal was heavily hunted for its coat and the population dropped from several hundred thousand to only 20,000. Entanglement in discarded fishing gear is also a threat. All Australian marine mammals are protected and the Australian Fur Seal population is making a recovery.

- See more at: <http://australianmuseum.net.au/australian-fur-seal#sthash.waCJRzCH.dpuf>

# Banarong

Rose Bay, a suburb of Sydney on Sydney harbour

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# Barrago

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# Boora Birra

The D’harawal name for the Sow and Pigs reef. As you travel on the ferry to Manly, you will see a marker buoy on the right hand side of the ferry in the shallow waters of the reef.

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# Butoowee

ceremony to teach children the laws and protect them from evil spirits  
cause them to break laws

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# Gunyas

houses

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## Related Glossary Terms

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# Kamarai

a Warrior

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## Related Glossary Terms

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# Marrai-uo

Sydney Golden Wattle

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## Related Glossary Terms

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# Migdan

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# Miwa Gawaian

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# Parra Doowee

the Eel Dreaming Spirit - which looks after the Parramatta River.

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