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The "Sky Pilot" at Lithgow, 1931

—Photo by courtesy of
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TRACKS IN THE NIGHT: From the Sky Pilot's Log, 2CH Broadcast

Those who do not know the bush may find it difficult to understand this story. It is the story of a night in the bush. Day time belongs to man and the birds: we could live in the bush for years without realising that the night brings another creation into being; that is, unless we like to take the trouble to find out something of this night life of the bush. Many a small animal lives only for the night, and those who are content to sleep through the hours of darkness may never know the little bush creatures who live in the night.

When the moon rises it brings to life many a small furry creature that shuns the bright light of day. I often listened to the voices of the night—little whisperings, squeakings, sometimes clear notes that might be taken for those of a bird—yet all these came from little furry creatures that play in the moonlight.

George and I camped one night near the source of the Rose River in Arnhem Land about 35 years ago. We had talked about the animals that came out at night and George had quite a good knowledge of many of them; but as most of his

learning came from the Aborigines it was mainly about animals that were good to eat. I told him about many of the smaller animals but I could see that he only half believed me; so one night we swept clear a patch of sand near our camp so that we could tell by the tracks in the morning what visitors we had had during the night.

George was not fond of sweeping; he mopped his forehead and remarked: "That ought to be enough, Smithy. It's too hot to go sweepin' half the Northern Territory. You won't get many tracks here—you may not get any at all. There don't seem to be many animals in this desert country near the coast."

"It is surprising," I replied, "how many small creatures there are in the desert. I've found most interesting things away on the Nullarbor Plains that one would never dream could exist in such a desert."

"Well," George agreed reluctantly, "I suppose there are animals even in the desert, though what they find to live on beats me. Anyway it's interestin' findin' out all we can about the animals. Might come in handy when we get real hungry, you know. If we find out what animals are about it ought to be easy to trap 'em later."

"George," I told him, "you have lived too long amongst the blacks; you are always thinking of things to eat. We've plenty of beef and we don't need to do any hunting for food. It's purely a matter of scientific interest to me; I want to learn all I can about the little bush creatures that only come out at night."

"Then why don't you ask the blacks? They seem to know all about the animals in the district, and it would be a lot easier than experimentin' on your own."

"I am always ready to learn from the blacks, George, but I have to see for myself. I can't record observations that are second-hand; that is one of the first laws of scientific research."

"Well, I don't want to stop you, but it seems a lot of wasted effort to me. The trouble is you always drag me into it. If my old mother could see me now sweepin' the sand ridge with a bit of a branch for a broom she would think I wasn't right in the head."

"Don't be silly; you're just as interested as I am and you wouldn't want to be left out. Anyhow you go to sleep now; this sand should show all the tracks of our night visitors. I'll tell you about them in the morning."

"As long as you leave it till mornin' that suits me; but for heaven's sake don't wake me up in the middle of the night to say you saw a possum or a rat or somethin'."

"All right, George; I won't wake you before dawn. That's a promise."

That night I slept as soundly as George, but I awoke at dawn and went to examine the ground

that we had swept clear the night before. In spite of all he had said George joined me, and together we read the story of the tracks left in the night.

"Here's a dingo track," George announced, as he scanned the sand. "Look, it goes right up to our nets and then back again."

"Yes; and you can see it walked more slowly as it got nearer—the tracks are closer and closer together as if our visitor was afraid and walked very softly and slowly as it got near to us."

"It came pretty close to my net," George said. "I wish I'd heard it; it would have made a sitting shot."

"Probably the dingo knew it would be dangerous to wake us as you can tell by the way it backed off. But what are these tracks, George? Look, these ones here."

"I'm hanged if I know. Looks as if someone tried to brush them out. Oh, wait a minute . . . yes, I guess it was a porcupine."

"That's what it is," I agreed. "But don't call it a porcupine George—it is a spiny ant-eater, though people used to call it an Echidna. It's the nearest living relative to the platypus which is the only other furred animal that lays eggs."

"You said the only **other** furred animal—the porcupine is not a furred animal."

"The spines are developed from greatly enlarged hairs, as is the horn of a rhinoceros; the ant-eater is entitled to be called a "furred" animal, I think."

"Anyhow," said George, changing the subject, "here is the track of a bird. I wonder what bird would be wanderin' about at night. Maybe it's a curlew; what do you think?"

"Probably. I had a pet curlew once. It broke its wing in a storm and I set it, but when it could fly again it wouldn't go away. It used to wander about my room at night and scream like a half-murdered child. I called it 'Murder'."

"Yes, I remember it," George said, feelingly. "It scared the daylight out of me the first night I camped in your room and it screamed under my bed. But what are those tracks? They are big compared to the others—almost like a young wallaby."

"Those are the tracks of a tree kangaroo. He must have come down from his tree during the night and had a walk round the camp—or a hop round the camp—whatever you prefer."

"A tree kangaroo," George repeated. "I once caught hold of one and it gave me an awful kick. I would sooner try to hold a wild bull than one of those tree kangaroos. What do they feed on, Smithy? Do they eat grass like other kangaroos?"

"No, they eat the leaves of the white cedar and other trees, but in captivity they eat fruit and bread quite readily."

George was examining the ground closely and he did not speak for a time, then he said: "Look, Smithy; what are these small tracks? It looks as if the fairies have been dancing on the sand in the light of the moon."

"Those are the tracks of the kangaroo-rats. They wait till the moon rises and then they dance and play about as if all time were their own. Sometimes I have lain awake and watched them. They enjoy life and they seem to dance just with the joy of living."

"Here," George continued, "are little tracks like those of tiny birds—what are they?"

"They are the tracks of the marsupial mice—little brush-tailed creatures with tiny delicate feet like those of a fairy. They dance in the moonlight from the sheer joy of life. Yes, those are the tracks that you see all over the sandy ground."

"There's no doubt this is interestin', Smithy. You've got me with these here tracks. I'm be-ginnin' to be able to read 'em myself. See here, this twisted tail, I suppose it is the track of a snake?"

"Yes, George, that is a snake's track; you can see it quite clearly in the sand. But it doesn't appear to have been very hungry. As you see it has not paused but has gone right across the sand patch as if it had urgent business elsewhere. If it was hungry it would have stopped to wait for frogs or mice. A snake looks just like a dry branch or stick when it doesn't want to be seen."

"Say," exclaimed George, "there's the tracks of an old man kangaroo over here on the edge of the clearin'. I nearly missed it as he only touched the ground once and cleared the rest of the sand you swept with his next jump. He must have been a beauty—one of them old red, ridge-kangaroos."

"Yes," I agreed. "He must have been over six feet high at the very least. And look! Just beside his tracks are those of his tiny cousin the Northern Hopping Mouse. Perhaps I shouldn't call it a cousin to the kangaroo as the only thing they have in common is the habit of hopping or jumping instead of running."

"You don't mean a Kangaroo Rat, do you?"

"No, it's only as big as a mouse; a kind of sandy brown in colour with whitish underparts. It's a pretty little thing, but very lively and hard to catch. If you dig up its nest there are so many openings that it is almost impossible to stop them escaping. It has a graceful tail with a brush on the end which it seems to use as a rudder and balancer when it is hopping."

"Well, who would have thought that all these animals would have come by in the night? Even if we had been lying awake we wouldn't have heard 'em—except maybe the thump of the old man kangaroo. They've all disappeared now that

daylight's come. I don't suppose they know they left their footprints behind for us to read!"

"The wouldn't be worrying about their footprints, George, but they're there just the same. The poet spoke about 'footprints on the sands of time' that we all leave behind us. We live our life for a brief space and then pass on, but whether we wish to or not we all leave our footprints behind for others to follow."

"If we could look back," George observed wryly, "and see all the footprints we had made I guess some of 'em would be a bit wobbly."

"I'm afraid so, George. And those wobbly footprints may be the very ones that will upset someone who follows after us. What we do today will affect someone tomorrow either for good or bad. Many a good man has helped and inspired thousands of others long after his death by the tracks he has left in the sands of time. We say that we live our own life and it is nobody's business but our own, yet all the time it is impossible for us to live to ourselves. Other people will be affected. The only safe thing for us to do is to follow some reliable footprints ourselves. We could all echo David's prayer in the 17th Psalm: "Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not."

FURNITURE TRAVELLERS: Over the years the N.S.W. Furniture Travellers have done a great deal for this work. They made it possible for each child to have a new inner-spring mattress and a bedside locker besides many other articles for their comfort and pleasure. We are deeply indebted to them in many ways; they have always helped us to obtain furniture and fittings at the lowest possible cost and we have come to depend on them for anything at all in this line. As we come to the end of this year it is only fitting that we should remember all they have done for us.

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS: As usual the dark children will be staying in the private homes of various friends from 26th December until 16th January. During this period the staff will also take their holidays and the Mission Farm will be closed. Please make this known to as many friends as possible to save disappointment if they had planned to visit us then. There will be a caretaker to look after the farm, of course, but it will not be open for inspection.

BUILDING PROGRAMME: Already the staff flat has been completed enough to allow it to be occupied; the new roof is on the Mission House and the foundations and floor joists are in position for the children's dining room, study room and laundry. The appeal for £5,000 has met with a wonderful response and as this paper

goes to the printer (early in December) the amount of £2,200 has already been received for the Special Building Fund. The next building planned is the extra wing for the boys' dormitory; just how soon this is available will depend on the further response to our appeal. As we had planned these building operations to cover a period of up to two years and within two months almost half has been received we can look forward with perfect confidence to the future.

FINANCE: Although our Special Building Fund has been very well supported we must remind our supporters that the General Fund is also very important. While the building is going on the dark children still have to be fed, clothed and cared for in various ways. Usually we have considerable interest shown in the children just before Christmas by various organisations anxious to see that the children do not miss out on Christmas. Toys are usually well supplied and we are always able to see that the children have a fair share of these; but toys alone will not keep this work going, and some of our supporters insist that their donations at this time of the year "must be spent on the children's Christmas."

But what about after Christmas? The children come home from their holidays and we are faced with considerable expense not only for their ordinary needs but for school requisites and school uniforms. Some people have been very good to us this year and have sent clothes instead of toys; for instance the women from Country Club Factory, Northmead, made 56 dresses for our children besides shirts, trousers and pyjamas. Gifts such as these are a great help to us and we are most grateful for all those who have helped with clothing, foodstuff and other practical items.

January is always a very lean month as regards finance; most people have spent heavily over Christmas and they are faced with holiday expenses on top of this; however we would ask you to remember us and our financial needs in this "off" month of the year.

CHRISTMAS PARTIES: Friends have been very good to our children again this Christmas and they have had every Saturday booked up for many weeks before Christmas for outings, parties or other treats. We are forced to limit the number of parties the children can attend; no child, whatever the colour, can remain unspoiled if faced with party after party for several weeks. Fortunately some organisations are making arrangements to take our children for out-

ings later in the New Year and the Autumn instead of at Christmas, and this is much appreciated, by us as well as the children.

STAFF: During the past year we have had the best staff since the Mission was founded. Miss McEachern and Miss Dora Mitchell were with us last year; this year we have added to the staff Miss Ailsa Davies and Miss Jessie Kilpatrick. Miss Davies was trained at Renwick Hospital (as was Miss Meryl McEachern) and Miss Kilpatrick (all the way from Scotland!) has proved to be a great asset also. In the office Mrs. Warwick has had the voluntary help of Mrs. C. K. Hammond for two days each week; this has been a tremendous help as the work of the Mission is increasing so rapidly that it is almost impossible to keep pace with the office work. We praise God for the devotion and efficiency of all the staff members and we wish them every blessing as they commence their well earned holidays after Christmas, while the children are away.

CHRISTMAS DAY: Sometimes we are asked to allow different children to go to friends for Christmas Day but this is not allowed. This is not like an Institution; it is a real home to most of the children and previously some were bitterly disappointed when they missed the fun of the family Christmas, unwrapping their presents and comparing them with the others. We have a special Christmas service at the Mission Farm and we seek to teach the children the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas without Christ must be an empty one indeed; yet it seems that in these days when the Day has been commercialised there are many who hardly spare a thought for the Christ of God who brought salvation to man through His death and resurrection. We look forward to that great day when He shall return in glory and power to set up His kingdom on earth; then at last the knowledge of the Lord shall fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

We wish all our supporters God's richest blessing this Christmas and throughout the New Year. Thank you for what you have made possible through your gifts and service in the care of these little dark children. Our work is above all a spiritual work and we are not content with the mere feeding, clothing and physical care of these children; we pray that each one may grow into a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.