
Folklore of Aborigines

Left by Lyle Roberts

(Contributed by G. Hall, Secretary,
Richmond River Historical Society)

The announcement in "The Northern Star" of the death of the old Cubawee identity, Lyle Roberts, came as a shock.

A fortnight ago he was at Lismore Museum and related what he could recall—or as much as he thought we should know—of the early aboriginal customs and legends of the Richmond River natives.

Now Lyle Roberts has gone, and with him has passed a good slice of the history of the early aborigines of this district.

Our job in the Historical Society is to obtain, record and preserve an accurate record of historical material, and to this end the history of the aboriginal people is of tremendous interest and value. One of our members, Miss Mildred Norledge, of the Kyogle chapter, specialises in the collection of aboriginal folklore, and it was at her request that I arranged this meeting with Lyle Roberts. My part was to bring them together, and help in any way possible to record all information.

So they came—Miss Norledge, Mr. Jim Morgan of Coraki (an aboriginal), Mr. Lyle Roberts and myself. They talked a lot, Jim and Lyle occasionally in their own language, then back to Miss Norledge, busy with her pencil. I just sat there and watched them, fed them, and threw in an occasional question.

Thus there came to us at least one authentic aboriginal legend, some fragments of others, but very little about the "making of men" among the early tribes.

It is known that Lyle Roberts was probably the last of the Richmond aborigines to be initiated according to tribal lore. But he would not talk about it.

Beyond telling us that he was away from his own country for some months, even over as far as the Clarence, we learned nothing about the actual ceremony of initiation. The old man was quite gentle with us. He just did not remember. Of course, there was a woman present at the interview.

But he did tell us of the cave and the big native plum-tree that was out at the Parrot's Nest, and all that happened there according to the stories of his people, and this legend will be recorded and filed in our archives.

As Lyle Roberts spoke, I was struck by the fine, sensitive features of the old man. Guided by some impulse that came to me just at that moment, I asked

his permission to photograph him. Permission granted, I rang our photographer, Mr. Ron Wotherspoon, and asked him to come down with his camera. Mr. Wotherspoon was leaving for Sydney that day, but came in, posed the old aboriginal and took his photograph.

Thus it came about that the Richmond River Historical Society obtained the last spoken legend and the last photograph taken of Lyle Roberts. They will remain in the archives as a valuable asset, available to present and future students.

Lyle Roberts grew old gracefully. He has gone, and the particular aboriginal freemasonry that forbids him to talk of such things as initiation ceremonies held him true to the end of his life. May his spirit rest in peace with those of his forefathers.



This Central Australian aborigine had no difficulty in getting himself a juicy crocodile steak for dinner.