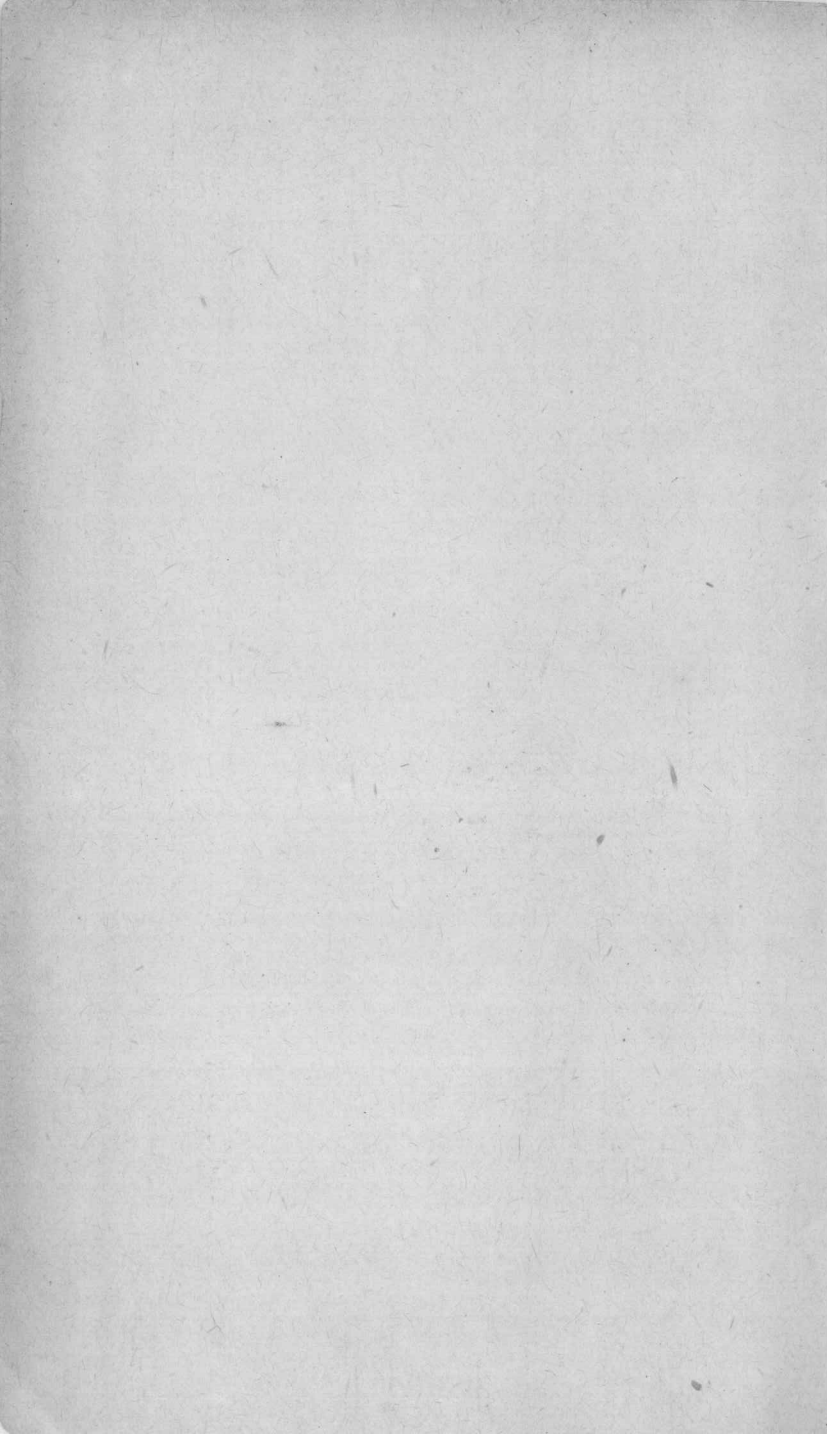


Xavier Herbert  
Seven Emus



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# SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

A Collection of Works by Writers in the English Language

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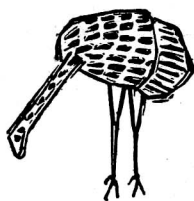
Xavier Herbert: SEVEN EMUS

*By the Author*

CAPRICORNIA

SEVEN EMUS

SOLDIERS' WOMEN



# *Seven Emus*

by XAVIER HERBERT

SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN

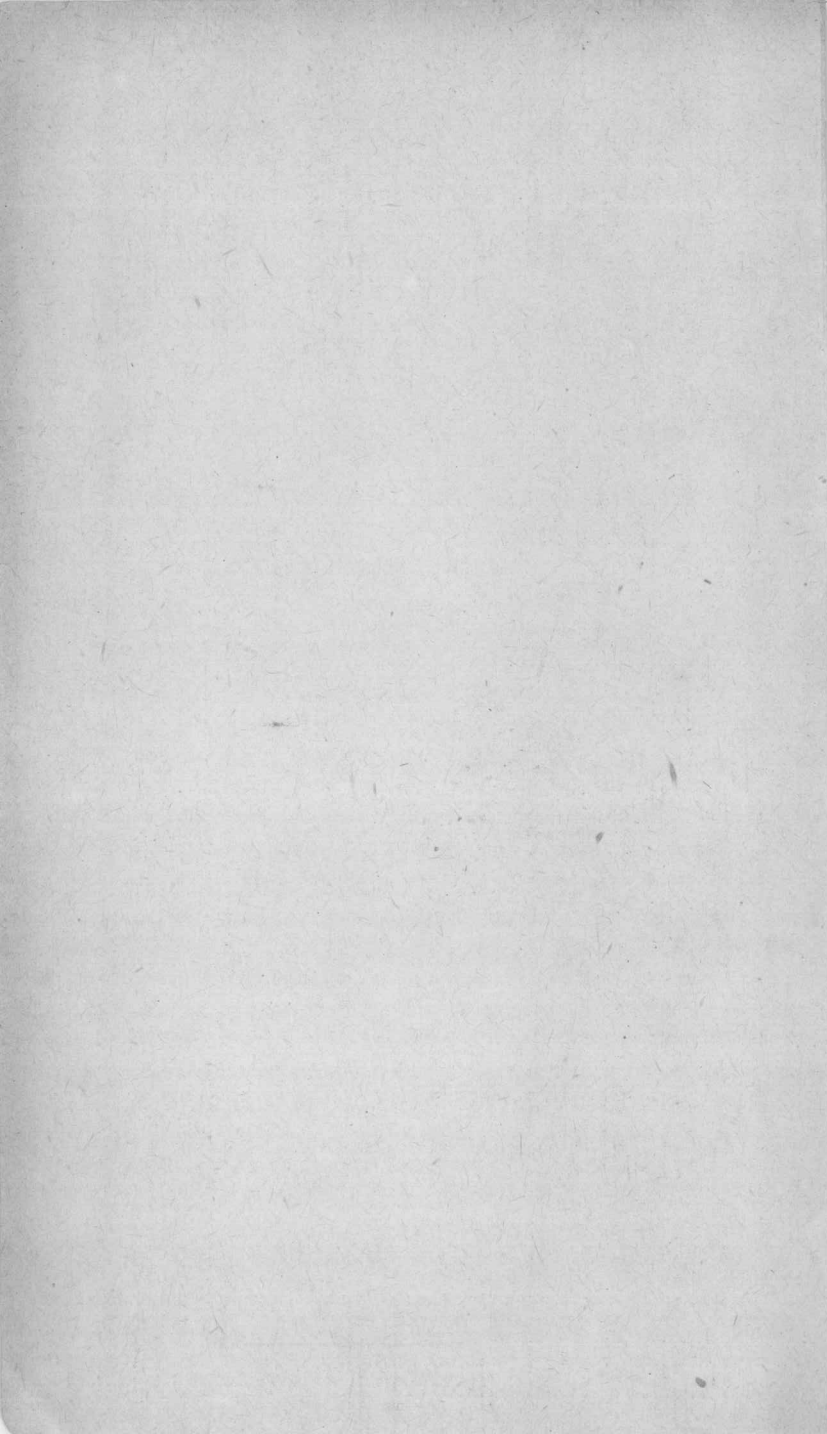


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*To Bill Harney,*  
my old mate  
of the spear-grass and the  
spinifex and the  
Heights of Parnassus.







# I

Seven Emus Station, a cattle-run, away in the wild red sandstone country back of the North-west port of Dampier, took its name from an Aboriginal legend concerning ancient events supposed to have taken place in the locality.

The Seven Emus legend told of how, in the Dream-time, Wanjin the Dingo, the Red Wolf, strove for the love of the Seven Emu Sisters.. the Dream-time being that age of wonders, according to Australian Aboriginal lore, before the incarnation of the spirits of humans, when the Totem Heroes roamed the earth.. which Heroes, super-animals of sorts, were the creators of all things, including mortal men in their multifarious totem-groups or clans, Kangaroo, Emu, Snake, Brolga, Goanna, and all the rest.

Now, the Totem Heroes were bound by the strict law regulating mating (allotment of spouses through systematic grouping into which individuals are born) just as much as the humans with whom eventually they stocked the earth.. for it was they, the Heroes, who made that law, first of all laws, in order that men should not waste their superior substance eternally in strife over mating, as do their totem brethren, the lower animals.. yet in passion could the Heroes be as heedless of propriety as their mortal children.. like Wanjin the Dingo, lusting after the Emu Sisters, who stood in predetermined legal relationship to him no less than as potential mothers-in-law.

Nothing like so indifferent to the law were those seven objects of Wanjin's desire.. or maybe they simply did not like him.. at any rate, the Emu Sisters spurned his advances, and when, in wolfish fashion, he persisted, they fled from him, easily eluding him, for all his swiftness, not because they, first of all emus, were so fleet of foot as their descendants are, but could fly, having full-sized wings like any other bird, not the useless little things that, ever since that business with Wanjin, have bound the like of those great birds to earth.

But Wanjin was canine, original possessor of the quality called doggedness and the matchless sniffing-out faculty that goes with it. Hence it was not long before he located the Sisters, roosting amongst tumbled sandstone in a gorge they'd scooped out for the occasion (thus, according to Aboriginal legend, did all the features of the Australian landscape have their origin, in some need or whimsy of the Totem Heroes), this gorge the same as that from which the stream now called the Rusty River flows during the rains, out of the flat-topped steep-walled ranges called the Ship Hills, through the red flats where today stands the homestead of Seven Emus Station.

This time Wanjin caught the Sisters hampered with their possessions, the properties of the cult they were to

initiate, the Emu Totem or Dreaming – the sacred stones and implements as well as clinging human shades destined to be born as Emu people – so that they could not take wing.

But posterity must be served, above all, in the case of primitive people, in the matter of upholding tribal law and preservation of the objects that are outward and visible symbols of the law.. therefore the Emu Sisters daren't surrender, but sought refuge in the rocks and a hiding-place for their precious things, scratching out a cave that remains to this day the reliquary for sacred properties of the Emu Dreaming and bourn for spirit children of the ilk awaiting reincarnation.

Cleverest of all animals are dogs, of course, and cleverest of them the originator of their tribe, the dingo, as none knows better than the squatters, whose stock he has plundered ruthlessly ever since those gentry presumed to squat upon his hunting-grounds.. the dingo, who takes his canniness direct from the Dream-time ancestor, Wanjin, who laid a fire outside the Emu Sisters' cave, at once to smoke them out and to singe those wings which put him so much at disadvantage.

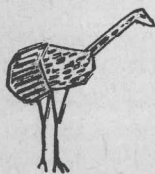
Now, the Dream-time Heroes, for all their legendary powers in some things, were often just as impotent as mortals.. like the Emus, forced out of their cave, to lose their wings and to be so singed generally that the species has a charred appearance to this day.. yet marvels were mostly the order of those ancient times, hence while the Emus lost their wings in Wanjin's fire, another effect of it was to elongate their legs to those skinny black stilts on which the species can now outpace anything that runs, even the red wolf, the dingo.

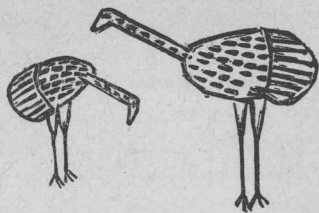
Still that wasn't the end of it.. nor ever end to it was there or ever will be, according to the legend, which says that the Sisters ran from Wanjin to the end of the earth, and still kept going, into the sky, where even today, or rather tonight, they are to be seen as the line

of stars belonging to the constellations we call Andromeda and Perseus, with the villain Wanjin in perpetual pursuit as the bright star Alpherat.

Like unto all Dream-time Heroes, the Emu Sisters left perpetuation of their cult to their human children.

How well the last of the Emu people honoured their sacred trust largely constitutes the burden of this tale.





## II

Seven Emus Station had been established six or seven years when the events to be recorded took place.. or rather than established let us say *founded*, to be in keeping with Australian stock-raising tradition, which it would seem is not always so much concerned with vulgar husbandry as with maintenance of a landed gentry, so that the beginnings of a stock-run may be considered to be in the nature of founding an aristocratic line, a dynasty.. hence the traditional term *founded*, hence also even the high-sounding *station* instead of the humble *farm*.

Terms too grand, these might be thought, applied to this place, which must be one of the poorest runs in all Australia, considering that the region, from an agronomical point of view, is one of the least fertile.. till one saw the homestead, that white-roofed village on the

scarlet plain beside the tree-lined lagoon that was all of the Rusty River hereabout in dry season . . the dozen or so gleaming buildings, the stockyards, the radio masts, clustered about a large bungalow, the Big House of squattocratic tradition, embowered in flaming bougain-villaea . . then surely it must be judged, at any rate by a stranger viewing it for the first time, centre of a property where stock would run not at one or two to the poor square mile, but mobs to the luscious acre, where the squatter might boast a knighthood bought by generous contribution to Country Party funds, certainly a racing-stable and a fleet of cars, even an aeroplane and a daughter married to a broken-down British lordling . . those hallmarks of Australian aristocracy.

Still, it was hardly likely that the prosperity of the place would be judged by its appearance, since even a complete stranger must come appraised of the fact that it was virtually a bankrupt estate, the seventy miles of rough bush road out from Dampier being impossible of negotiation without direction, and equally impossible that the Dampierites who gave the directions would flout Australian small-town tradition by failing to impart to a stranger all there was to know about everybody he would meet along his way.

Thus that stranger, whose coming on the day at which this tale begins set off the train of events culminating in the crisis which decided the fate of the station and the ancient institution it was named for, would certainly not be taken in by the apparent prosperity . . the stranger being Mr Malcom Gaborrow, B.A., Dip.Anth., an anthropologist or ethnologist come to study the Emu Totem.

What exactly Mr Gaborrow knew about the affairs of the station would depend on his informants, their propensity to exaggerate for the pleasure of it or with motive such as to express indignation, say, if they were numbered amongst the many creditors . . but it matters little whether he had the facts or not, since we have them.



Of this bankrupt manor there were two lords .. at any rate that was the position in law .. for the fact was that while one, Gaunt, was lordliness itself (hence nicknamed "The Baron", in accordance with Australian custom), Jones was about as unbaronial as anyone could be, not simply by disposition, but even by breed, being of that humblest of all peoples, Australian Aboriginal, not of them fully by any means, at most one-fourth, so that his complexion was no darker than swarthy, yet with the stamp of his primitive ancestry heavy on his features .. and in those parts a quarter is as good as a whole pretty well .. in the matter of what the whites who live there are pleased to call a *boong*.

The term *boong* is originally Malayan .. meaning "brother" .. but it doesn't mean anything like that in Australian usage.

To those who know anything about the social set-up in outback Australia, the idea of a boong's ever coming to be classed as a squatter must be utterly fantastic .. as indeed it must have seemed to the unassuming Bronco Jones himself, who'd had his beginnings in a blacks' camp, than which there is no place humbler in human existence, even if the camp be part of a town, as mostly in these days of advanced settlement in Australia .. for the primitive humpies of boughs and bark become little better structures of discarded roofing, flattened cans, old sacks, mother earth the floor, the bed, the dining-table .. the squalor having to be seen to be believed, but blame not due to anyone or anything, perhaps, except the fact that for what is bound by the stupidities of the Stone Age there is no help from understanding limited by so much that still belongs to the Middle Ages.

In such a place was born this Bronco Jones, of a half-caste mother and white father, latter unknown, according to police intelligence, which, since policemen in those parts are Protectors of Aborigines and everybody declared to be Aboriginal by the police is such unless able to

prove otherwise, keeps special tab on his like, very special tab in his case, surely, when he must be the first of his kind ever to rise so high.

Utterly fantastic this rise of Bronco's even to Bronco himself, it is suggested, for the reason that, while he was not without ambitiousness unusual in the like of him, he had, as he told people, never dreamt of anything like this . . . indeed, he had risen thus through force of circumstances even beyond his inclination, a peculiar fact being that the very initiation of these circumstances, namely his taking out the leasehold of that fertile bit of country near the Totem site which became the nucleus, even the inspiration, for the subsequent establishment of the station, was due less to acquisitiveness of the white man in him than to a blackfellow's hankering after the ancient ways . . . this evident enough in his talk of how he came here, pursuing his trade as horse-dealer, to cull a mob of brumbies he'd heard were wandering the river, and how, because he believed, as blackfellows do, that Totem sites are "lucky", he decided to make the place his home . . . and it was even more evident in his patronage of the cult, expressed in feeding the leaders without working them, in contriving to have two of his children born into it, in eagerness to explain its rites and show off its properties to visitors, and not least in championship of it when his partner, Gaunt, would have desecrated it by purloining bits and pieces of the properties as gifts for friends, championship so strong and true that even the Baron was brought at length to some sense of responsibility.

Interest such as Bronco's in the ways of those he would call the "Old People" is unusual in cross-breeds, at any rate when there is risk of betraying it to those representative of his superior inheritance, to whom they mostly express themselves concerning these poorest of poor relations of theirs with more or less amused contempt . . . but while attraction to the ancient ways might show spiritual