



The C.K. Thompson Collection

WOMBAT

by C.K. THOMPSON



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By C.K. Thompson, R.A.O.U., J.P.

(Member of the Royal Zoological Society of N.S.W. and the
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DEDICATION

*To my old friends
HAZEL and BILL JOYCE,
Fellow golfers and lovers of wild life.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although the wombat has been described often as the surliest and grumpiest animal in the Australian bush, this is really a slander on one of our most interesting marsupials. Wombats may look bad-tempered and stupid and may be unsociable in their wild state, but people who have reared them from cubhood as pets, report that in captivity, they are affectionate, inoffensive, playful and amusing.

There are many well-authenticated stories of pet wombats wandering in and out of houses like dogs, following children around like ordinary domestic animals, sleeping in armchairs and even enjoying to be nursed like a baby—a rather tough—looking and hefty baby when fully grown!

First record of a wombat seems to have been made in 1797 when the ship *Sydney Cove* was wrecked on an island in Bass Strait. There were plenty of wombats around, and the shipwrecked crew lived on them until rescued by the ship *Francis*, which took a sample wombat back to Sydney for Governor Hunter to have a look at. He thought it was such a novelty that he sent it home to England with a letter stating that the aborigines called it “wombach.” The Governor also wrote that from its burrowing habits it was thought to be a species of badger, but it also had the same manners as a bear.

Unlike a number of Australian animals and birds, the wombat has the distinction of retaining its aboriginal name. Early white settlers called it either beaver or badger—and it bears not the faintest resemblance to either. The pioneers named many of our native creatures after those they had seen in England and Europe. For instance, they called the Tasmanian marsupial wolf “hyena,” the koala “bear,” the dasyures “native cats,” and the spiny ant-eater “porcupine.” They also called the piping crow-shrike “magpie.” I prefer “magpie.”

The pioneers and bushmen ate wombats when they ran out of other meat. Opinions vary as to the eating qualities of “badger

steaks," but one well-known naturalist has stated that had wombat been first-class "tucker" instead of tasting musky and being very sinewy, the pioneers would have cleaned up every one and thus caused the early extinction of a notable marsupial.

Wombats are not very popular with farmers and settlers, because they break down wire netting fences to get at vegetable crops, while their long, deep tunnels constitute a danger to stock, and provide rabbits with ready-made warrens and burrows.

There are four kinds of wombats, two having hairy noses and two being "clean-shaven." Naked Nose prefers hilly forest and coastal country, while Hairy Nose inhabits the drier inland areas. Though all species were once very plentiful throughout Australia, Tasmania and the Bass Strait islands, gradually they are becoming fewer, and the day may arrive when they will become extinct. It is to be hoped that enough will be preserved in sanctuaries and reservations to obviate this zoological tragedy.

It is of great interest to note in passing that at Mowbray Swamp near Smithton in the north-west corner of Tasmania, scientists recently found the remains of a wombat the size of a pony. This gigantic "badger" and his relatives roamed the countryside about 600,000 years ago during the Ice Age.

An old bushman friend of mine once told me that wombats are so short-sighted that they will walk right past a man and not see him. Perhaps they don't want to see him. Maybe they are a little particular about the company they keep! This old chap also told me that when a wombat crosses a river or creek he just walks under the water "because he can't swim like a wallaby does." You cannot beat old bushmen for telling tall stories, can you? He did not tell me how many of these aquatic wombats got stuck in the mud and never saw their burrows again!

Though the wombat has been relentlessly persecuted by the white man from the earliest days because of its destructive habits, it is, like the platypus, the spiny ant-eater and the shy little numbat, a wholly distinctive Australian and, as such, should never be allowed to become extinct.

C. K. THOMPSON

CHAPTER ONE

The Coming of Bill

HIGH up among the rocks on the side of a steep hill which was one of a chain forming an insignificant spur of the Great Dividing Range, an old wombat had sunk a deep shaft and had made it her home. She was not unique in that. The hillside was honeycombed with similar burrows, in each of which dwelt a wombat, keeping strictly to itself.

Except in the mating season, which lasted only a few months—from round about April to June—they were an unsociable lot, these wombats. When they were not hunting for food, which generally was after night had fallen, they lodged deep in their burrows, receiving no visitors and paying no social calls. They were not, however, strictly nocturnal. On occasions they moved around in the daylight, but had absolutely no truck with each other, whether it was morning, noon or night. Their only relaxation appeared to be an occasional sunbath, taken in a shallow depression scooped out of the earth against a log or a rock. Almost every burrow that housed a wombat had its adjacent “bath.” But some of the marsupials were so reserved and aloof that they did not even indulge in the luxury of a sunbake lest some other wombat, or perhaps a passing snake or twittering bird should

observe them and thus disturb their privacy.

The old female wombat had sunk her burrow into the hillside several years earlier. The ground was so hard that she had driven the tunnel only a dozen feet, but the circumference was capacious enough for a child to crawl into if any child had the temerity to do so. Some of her neighbours who had tunnelled into softer earth had sunk their shafts to greater depths, the longest being almost fifty feet.

The old wombat, stoutly-built, clumsy-looking, with a short broad muzzle and thick, short stout limbs, clad in a coarse brown furred coat, had furnished her burrow with a very comfortable nest of bark, grass and leaves, which was located at the extremity in a small chamber she had hollowed out.

And it was here that her son Bill was born. He was a rather unattractive morsel of wombathood, was Bill. Skinny and hairless, he gave no hint in his early days of the powerful animal into which he would grow—provided always that the perils of the bush did not overtake him and shorten the life span that Mother Nature had intended for him.

Bill was an only child. It was a very rare thing for a wombat to have more than one youngster at a time, and Bill's mother conformed to the accepted practice of her race. For some months he was content to dwell in his mother's pouch, but when he was six months old and was fully furred, he was informed, politely but firmly, that his mother intended resigning her position as a convenient method of transport, and from then on he could get around on his own legs.

Bill did not object to this. He was growing fast and in due course would construct his own burrow and set up his home. He was no mother's boy.

From the mouth of the burrow a well-defined path led down to the open country where there was plenty of sweet

green grass and Bill and his mother made nightly excursions there for food. But they did not exist on grass alone. The inner bark of trees, roots of shrubs, thistles and similar herb-
age were frequent items on the menu. When Bill was very young, his mother often sought out patches of swordgrass and, pulling the stems out singly, gave them to Bill so that he could feast upon the soft white base-ends.

During their quests for food, they saw other wombats, but passed them as if they did not exist. On one occasion, a tough old man wombat deliberately barged into Bill, who was not quick enough to get out of his path. Bill resented this, and expressed his resentment with a few hoarse grunts; but his mother passed the matter over lightly. She succeeded in conveying to her son the information that the old man wombat had not been aggressive or looking for trouble, neither had he been particularly discourteous. He had been merely observing the wombat practice of keeping rigidly aloof from his kinsfolk. He just had not seen Bill. Privately, Bill thought that this was carrying unsociability to the extreme even if, like most wombats, the old warrior had been short-sighted.

It was when Bill was not quite twelve months old that he witnessed an unprecedented episode.

He and his mother were lumbering along a path towards the feeding grounds one night when they met another wombat. It was a large male and Bill got out of its path, expecting it to pass by without recognition. Judge his surprise, then, when it stopped and gave a hoarse grunt of greeting. This was astounding enough in itself, but when his own mother, his friend and guide who had taught him never to associate with others of his species, affectionately returned the greeting, Bill was, in turn, amazed, disgusted and perturbed.

The strange wombat advanced slowly until its nose actually rubbed that of Bill's mother. This was it, Bill told himself. She would never stand for that type of funny business. He looked at her in anticipation, confident that she would bite the impudent nose clean off the offensive newcomer. But when she rubbed her cheek against that nose instead of nipping it off, Bill was quite dumbfounded. In his limited experience, there was absolutely no precedent for that kind of thing.

Now thoroughly disgusted, the young wombat mooched away by himself, following the track that his mother and her new boy friend had taken, but proceeding slowly so as not to catch up with them. Obviously they were making for the usual feeding ground, and Bill, too, wanted to go there.

It was the only good browsing patch he knew and though he might feel indignant at his mother's betrayal of the wombat code of solitude, his indignation was not deep enough to put him on a hunger-strike.

In due course he reached the grassland, a fairly wide expanse of country bountifully grassed with luscious herbage, through which a shallow creek sang and babbled its way to join the river many miles to the south.

When Bill arrived, he noticed that there were several other wombats at dinner, but he took no notice of them. He could not see his mother or her new friend, and far from feeling hurt about it, was pleased.

He spent most of the night browsing on the grass or lying around loafing, and an hour or so before dawn decided to return home. Then it occurred to him that he did not have a home. Oh, yes, there was the burrow previously occupied by him and his mother, but he did not feel inclined to stay there any more. He would have either to find a disused one or dig one for himself. Pondering the pros and cons as he

trotted along, he decided to spend one last day in the family tunnel and on the following night to find a new residence and to live a free and independent bachelor existence.

Reaching the old familiar tunnel, he was about to slip into it when he met with a sudden check. Just inside the entrance with his nose poking out, was the strange wombat that his mother had befriended. Bill looked at him scornfully and then, over this animal's head, noticed his own mother. The look she gave her son was far from friendly, but this meant nothing. His mother would not have been an honest-to-goodness wombat if she had looked friendly.

Bill eyed the stranger with dislike and attempted to push past him to get into the burrow. The stranger, however, stood four-square and contested the move. His attitude was quite plain—Bill was not welcome. The stranger was a large and powerful animal and made its meaning and attitude perfectly clear by rearing on its haunches and bringing its heavy front paws down hard on Bill's head.

Withdrawing and mustering up all his dignity, Bill threw a glance of withering scorn at the wombat and another at his mother. Then he wheeled around and lumbered away. As this was wombat country he did not anticipate any difficulty in finding a temporary home. There was certain to be disused burrows around. In this his confidence was justified, for he had to go only a few hundred yards before he came upon a deep tunnel which bore every sign of being deserted.

He crawled into it and proceeded confidently. That it had been disused for some considerable time was apparent by the small falls of earth. Eventually he reached the end and though the nest of bark and dried grass was very old and definitely second hand, it would do him for one sleep, he decided.

Bill slept for a few hours and then woke up. He was

not comfortable and did not feel at home. He was restless and a little unhappy. For a time he lay in the old nest and then, getting up, made his way up the burrow to the open air. Outside the sun was shining brightly and it made him blink. He emerged from the tunnel and spent half an hour in a nearby dusthole before returning to the burrow to catch up on his sleep.

Bill used his new home for a week—seven long days and nights of restlessness, tinged with unhappiness. He did not know what was wrong with him, but he did know one thing—the charm of that district had gone.

He was returning from the grasslands very early one spring morning when he reached a great decision—he would leave this district and make his home elsewhere in some far-away place. As to his present temporary abode, he would not sleep in it again.

And though he did not relish travelling in broad daylight, the urge to depart was so great that he had to obey it. So off he went—lumbering aimlessly away on a trail that might lead to anywhere.

CHAPTER TWO

Bush Revenge

HAVING no immediate locality in view and not caring how much time he spent on house-hunting, Bill had not gone very far before he decided to have a rest, so he selected a shallow depression near a big log. This was open forest country, and there were several shallow depressions in the vicinity, apparently dustholes belonging once to grey kangaroos.

The signs told Bill that the kangaroos had not been around for some considerable time. These big marsupials were nomadic in their habits, wandering around the countryside in disorganised mobs, generally without an acknowledged leader. Their home was where they happened to be and the mob that had frequented the district where Bill now was, was many miles away.

Dropping into the dusty depression with a tired grunt, Bill was content to allow the rest of the bush to go hang, but from the activity all around him, he was the only lazy creature in those parts. It was early spring, and therefore nesting and breeding time for most of the birds and animals.

Lying negligently on his back in the dusthole, his short limbs pointing lazily skywards, Bill's attention was attracted

to a large handsome bird perched on the limb of a tree directly over his head. It was a red goshawk, a rather rare bird of prey, and it was looking at Bill as if it resented his being there. Actually, the red goshawk was not interested at all in Bill. It had seen him arrive and take up quarters in the kangaroo's disused dust-bath, and as long as he stayed there, the red goshawk was quite satisfied. Not that the handsome bird had anything to fear from the dumpy, earth-bound wombat.

The red goshawk was waiting for something to turn up in the way of prey. Its nest was half a mile away in a tall ironbark and was being looked after by its mate who, in addition, had two lusty nestlings to care for. It was not long since these young ones had emerged from their lavender-marked, bluish-white eggs and the parent red goshawks were hard put to it to sate the appetites of their vigorous offspring. Their visits to and from their large nest of sticks lined with leaves were many and the distances they had to travel with food grew longer as the supply nearer to home diminished.

Birds, reptiles and small animals formed the main diet of the red goshawks and the pair of birds had absolutely terrorised the neighbourhood ever since their youngsters had emerged from the eggs. Nothing was safe from or sacred to them. Their repeated raids on the nests of other birds had decimated the immediate vicinity of their own nest and the red goshawks had been forced to exist on mice and lizards with grasshoppers for dessert. They got along more or less satisfactorily, their fierce hooked bills making short work of any hapless creature captured.

At the exact moment that the male red goshawk sat in the tree over Bill the wombat's head, there was only one nest with nestlings in the area, and that belonged to a pair of magpies. There were three large fledglings in it and the

red goshawk had been trying to make up his mind for days to attack it. He was not afraid of the magpies, but he had enough sense to realise that tackling those indomitable birds would be a different proposition from raiding the nest of a peewit or a willy wagtail.

Not that peewits were easy game. The red goshawk and his mate together had attacked the nest of one pair and had been met with fierce opposition by the peewits, who were determined to protect their large mud nest by every means in their power. They gave the red goshawks a rough time, but unfortunately it was not rough enough—the hawks each had got away with a nestling. Nothing daunted, the valiant black and white birds had mated again and there were three new eggs in their mud home. The red goshawk knew this, but eggs did not interest him as much as nestlings, and he was content to wait until they hatched out.

But peewits and magpies were alike only in colouring. In fighting prowess, the magpie could lick half a dozen peewits. There were very few birds in the bush that could handle a magpie even at ordinary times; while in the nesting season, the sharp-billed maggie was a fighting fury that was given a wide berth by all sensible birds.

The red goshawk knew all about this. It did not scare him but it did make him cautious. He was as game as any magpie ever hatched, but was not silly enough to attack the pied songsters' nest while the owners were in residence.

Sitting on the limb over the wombat's head, the red goshawk turned the matter over and over in his mind. The tree containing the magpies' nest was only a hundred yards away and he could see it from where he sat. It was a large structure of sticks and it was continually guarded by one or other of the parent birds. That was the whole trouble from the red goshawk's point of view. In ordinary circum-

stances, both birds would be out hunting for food for their hungry children, but the presence of the red goshawks in the neighborhood—which of course was well known to the magpies—made it imperative that the nest be not left unguarded for a moment.

The red goshawk had flown unobtrusively into the tree where he was now perched and, as far as he knew, the magpies were unaware of it. He based his belief on the fact that he had remained unmolested. He felt quite sure that had the magpies sighted him they would have given battle at once. He was sorry now that he had not brought his mate with him. One of them might have been able to create a diversion to enable the other to attack the nest.

But what guarantee had he that even that plan would work? As far as that went, he could not be certain of the outcome of an attack launched on the nest by him and his mate in concert. It was a worrying problem, no question about it.

And so the red goshawk sat there in the tree hoping that both magpies would leave the nest long enough for him to raid it and secure one or more of the fledglings.

His prayers, suddenly, were answered. One of the magpies which had been away hunting, returned to the nest with a morsel and was greeted eagerly by the squawking youngsters. The row they kicked up yelling for food made the red goshawk's bill water. The parent magpie stayed only long enough to pop the tid-bit into a gaping mouth and then was off again—but this time was followed by its mate, who wanted a bit of exercise.

On silent wings the red goshawk plunged straight at the magpies' nest but had not covered half the distance before the harsh screech of a peewit rent the air and two gallant little black and white birds darted from their own

nest nearby to intercept the fleeting hawk. The warning cry of the peewits reached the two magpies, who wheeled round like jet fighters piloted by war aces and came back like a pair of arrows.

The peewits reached the magpies' nest a second ahead of the red goshawk and with shrill cries and beating wings sought to divert the red terror from the fledglings. The red goshawk did not land on or near the nest, but shot straight over it, deliberately barging into a peewit and knocking the spirited little bird head over claws in midair. It righted itself and flew uncertainly to a nearby branch to recover its equilibrium, while its small mate flew round and round the red goshawk, harassing it, insulting it, but doing it little harm.

And then the angry parent magpies hurtled into the fray. The red goshawk was big and it was a fierce fighter. It wheeled after its encounter with the peewit and was ready for both magpies. Those enraged birds, disdaining finesse in battle, dashed at the intruder with snapping beaks and beating wings, and feathers flew in all directions as three irate birds fought in the air, among the branches and around the nest.

The undamaged peewit flew on the outskirts of the battle excitedly endeavouring to take part, while its flustered little mate perched on a nearby tree limb and carefully examined itself for injuries. Finding none, it, too, took to the air and tried to enter the fight, but like its mate it was forced into the unwilling role of onlooker.

What with the screeching of the red goshawk, the squawking of the magpies, the harsh, flat notes of the peewits and the excited chatter of an inquisitive willy wagtail which was looping the loop like an insane aeroplane pilot, the bush was turned into a pandemonium which effectually disturbed the rest of Bill the wombat. He could not see much of what was

going on among the treetops, but he could hear it, and he wished heartily that those noisy birds would go elsewhere and do their ungentlemanly brawling.

But if the noise merely annoyed the wombat, it had a different effect upon the various birds in the area. To all the feathered creatures the red goshawk was a mortal enemy. Most of them had cause to rue the day that the bird of prey and his mate had made their home there. Willy wagtails, honeyeaters, apostle birds, finches of all kinds, butcher birds and several others, not content to be just bystanders, flashed from tree, bush and scrub to assist the battling magpies and their peewit auxiliaries. The peewits were the most recent sufferers, and they yearned to get to close quarters with the red goshawk. The magpies, however, gave them no space in which to operate.

It was, of course, nothing new for many different birds to combine in attacking a common enemy, but on this occasion there were so many of them that it had its advantages for the red goshawk. They got in each other's way and one magpie; to its surprise, found itself in a claw to claw bout with a pied butcher bird, while four apostle birds were engaged in a fierce struggle among themselves. And willy wagtail was most indignant when a peewit tried to pull out his tail-feathers.

The pied butcher bird that accidentally had become entangled with the magpie, had a nest in the fork of a high gum tree not far from the magpie's own home. It was an open and deep structure of sticks and twigs, lined with dried grass and fibre roots. At one stage it had contained five greyish-green eggs speckled with brown and these had mysteriously disappeared while the parent birds were out hunting one day. A passing crow had been responsible for the theft, but the butcher bird blamed the red goshawk and

now sought a chance for revenge. He quickly disengaged himself from the magpie, with whom he had no quarrel at all, and added his flute-like notes to the general uproar.

Bird calls singly, and even collectively when in harmony, are a delight to hear, but when they are all mixed up in one squawking chorus, it can be nerve-wracking. So thought Bill the wombat, and he resolved to move away to try to find peace elsewhere.

But before he could put his resolve into action, things began to happen.

The red goshawk succeeded in disengaging himself from the fighting balls of feathers and, turning tail, fled swiftly away. This was the signal for all the other birds to cease their private quarrels and to take after him. The magpies, the peewits, the butcher bird and most of the lesser fry, willy wagtail well in front, formed up like a squadron of fighter planes and dive-bombed him relentlessly. He could not retain height and they forced him lower and lower until eventually he crash-landed—right on top of the startled wombat lying in his dusthole.

Scrambling to his feet with a loud grunt of surprise, Bill found himself the centre of a heap of fighting birds. The red goshawk was down on the ground now, valiantly endeavouring to beat off the combined assaults of his enemies, who were determined to do him as much harm as they could. Willy wagtail, nearly crazy with excitement, darted hither and thither above the feather mass without being able to lend a beak or claw and then perched on Bill's back, using him as a grandstand and chattering shrilly into his ear.

That, for Bill, was the final insult. He got under way and left the spot at a shambling trot, treading on the red goshawk as he did so. That wounded nest robber screeched loudly and for the first time the other birds became aware of

Bill's presence. With one accord they swept from the earth and vanished into various trees, while the red goshawk, bedraggled and with quite a few feathers missing, managed to become air-borne and, wobbling unsteadily, made its ragged way back to its own nest.

Grunting and snorting to himself, Bill the wombat ambled through the thickets, heading for nowhere in particular. High up in a spotted gum where they had flown after the defeat of the red goshawk, the magpies watched his departure with kindling eyes. The male bird decided that he did not like Bill and, launching himself from the tree, dived straight and true, his long, sharp bill striking Bill exactly where his tail would have been if he had one. Bill's startled grunt of wounded surprise echoed through the scrub and as the magpie whirled aloft and returned to his nest, the wombat bolted, more than effectually speeded upon his parting way.

As he mooched along, Bill told himself that he had only himself to blame. He had no right to be wandering around in the middle of the day. The sun shone warmly on his thick fur and he was hot, tired and thirsty. He managed to cool himself somewhat with a draught of murky water from a leaf-filled rock-pool, and then decided to find a place to sleep in. He did not like the idea of camping out in the open where he was liable to be disturbed by fighting birds, so he looked around for a place in which to dig a burrow—a permanent one if possible. He could not find a satisfactory site, but luck favored him by directing his dragging footsteps to a cleft in some rocks. It would do for a time. Let him have a good sleep and then he could find a permanent dwelling.

Bill was investigating the rock cleft when he was startled by a terrific screaming as if every bird in creation were holding a council meeting and objecting to something the

mayor had said. He snorted loudly and disgustedly, thinking that the red goshawk and his enemies had followed him to renew their hostilities, whereas the noise was created by a flock of little green parakeets which flashed like miniature verdant bullets through the leaves and branches overhead so swiftly that the eye scarcely could follow them.

Bill did not try to follow them with his eye. Birds gave him a pain in the neck and he had no wish to dislocate that neck by attempting the impossible. In any case he was so constructed by nature that he could not do any star-gazing if he had wanted to.

His startled surprise quickly gave way to exasperation as the parakeets, refusing to go away, dashed in and out of the treetops, screaming shrilly as if they were being hunted by some feathered Nemesis.

And they were. Bill learned this in tragic fashion when something as soft as thistledown fell lightly on his back and then tumbled to the ground. It was the dead body of one of the little "greenies." Bill looked at it thoughtfully, decided that it was no good to eat, and then resumed his inspection of the rock cleft.

The unfortunate green parakeet had been a victim of the swiftest member of the hawk family—a peregrine or blackcheeked falcon—which even now was still chasing and dealing out death to the frantic flock above. An absolute demon, the falcon was the only bird of prey capable of following the incredibly swift-flying parakeets as they flashed among twigs, branches and leaves, and killing them with blows delivered with the hind claw during lightning-like swoops. Bold and fearless to a high degree, there was hardly a bird it would not tackle and even willy wagtail, who knew more tricks than the greatest human stunt aeroplane pilot, was not safe from it.

Finally, in an effort to rid themselves of the awful death-dealing slayer on their tails, the parakeets flew deeper into the bush and Bill the wombat was left in peace. He managed to enter the cleft in the rocks, though there was not much space to spare for his bulk, and settled down for a good sleep .